

April 30, 2013

The Honorable Beto O'Rourke
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman O'Rourke:

We are writing to thank you for your leadership on and continued attention to the needs of America's children, and to express our support for the Foster Children Opportunity Act. As representatives of organizations committed to improving the health and well-being of children and families, we are pleased that the Foster Children Opportunity Act seeks to ensure that abused and neglected immigrant children have an opportunity to obtain the legal immigrant status to which they are entitled prior to aging out of the foster care system.

The introduction of the Foster Children Opportunity Act comes at an important time. As our nation's leaders move forward with the important task of reforming the federal immigration system it is critical that they consider the specific needs of children and youth. Children of immigrants currently comprise 1 in 4 of all children in the U.S. and represent the fastest growing segment of the child population.

Despite the significant impact of immigration policy on children's lives, children have historically been disregarded and often intentionally excluded in U.S. immigration policy decisions. Even the youngest children have few special protections under current immigration law and their best interests are often considered irrelevant in critical decisions regarding their own or a parent's ability to enter or stay in the United States. Furthermore, complicated laws determining immigrant eligibility for federally funded services have created significant barriers for children in immigrant families. As a result, both children who are immigrants themselves as well as U.S. citizen children with immigrant parents continue to face high rates of family separation, emotional trauma, economic instability, poor educational outcomes, and limited access to critical services and programs.

Immigrant children involved in the child welfare system are especially vulnerable and frequently overlooked. These youth are often eligible for special forms of immigration relief, including Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) but early identification is critical given that a child can lose SIJS eligibility once the court terminates jurisdiction over the youth. More often than not, court and child welfare officials are unaware of immigration relief options available, leaving these children at risk of deportation at any time and drastically limiting their educational and work opportunities when they "age out" of the system.

Sadly, each year, many undocumented children age out of the child welfare system without the opportunity to obtain legal immigrant status. On exiting the system, they often lose their only chance to gain legal status and leave the foster care system in a state of limbo, lacking the lawful status necessary to succeed in the U.S. They face a daily risk of deportation, are unable to obtain employment authorization, a driver's license, access to benefits and in most states, are not eligible for in-state tuition at state colleges and universities.

Child welfare staff, judges, attorneys and other service providers play a critical role in the lives of these young people. It is essential that they are knowledgeable about immigration issues and SIJS in particular, and has access to the training and resources necessary to fully protect all children in its care.

The Foster Children Opportunity Act aims to ensure that all children in the foster care system are screened for SIJS and other immigration relief options. The bill provides needed technical assistance to child welfare agencies and resources to train judges, attorneys and other legal workers on this matter. It also clarifies that a state can obtain reimbursement for the foster care costs of a child once the child obtains SIJS status and ensures that children who receive SIJS are exempted from the 5 year ban placed on receiving Federal means-tested public benefits.

This Act seeks to protect abused and neglected children by ensuring they have a fighting chance at leading healthy and productive lives when they exit the child welfare system. We are grateful for your leadership in introducing the Foster Children Opportunity Act, and we look forward to working with you to ensure passage of this critical legislation.

Sincerely,

First Focus Campaign for Children

9to5 (Colorado)

A & K Enterprise (Virginia)

A World Fit For Kids! (California)

Advocacy for Justice and Peace Committee of the Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia (Pennsylvania)

Advocates for Children and Youth (Maryland)

AFSCME

AFSCME Local 1398 (Pennsylvania)

Alta Mira Specialized Family services (New Mexico)

Americans for Immigrant Justice

Annunciation House, Inc. (Texas)

Arkansas Interfaith Alliance (Arkansas)

Arkansas Voices for the Children Left Behind (Arkansas)

Arizona's Children Association (Arizona)

Asheville RESULTS Group (North Carolina)

Augustinians (Pennsylvania)

Avant-Garde FFA (California)

Asylee Women Enterprise (Maryland)

Boston University Civil Litigation Program (Massachusetts)

BRICK CAPITAL CDC (North Carolina)

California Center for Rural Policy (California)

California Department of Social Services (California)

Catholic Social Services (Georgia)

CEO Pipe Organs/Golden Ponds Farm (Wisconsin)

Center for Independent Living of South Florida, Inc. (Florida)
Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) (California)
Chicago Women's AIDS Project (Illinois)
Children's Action Alliance (Arizona)
Children's Advocacy Institute
Children's Defense Fund
Children's Services Council of Broward County (Florida)
Church of St. Andrew (Minnesota)
Civic Center Barrio Housing Corporation (California)
CLASP
CL Enterprises (Illinois)
Coition For Justice in Education (New York)
Coalition On Human Needs
Community Action Of Greater Indianapolis (Indiana)
Community Action Partnership
Community Legal Services in East Palo Alto (California) Concerned Americans (Texas)
Community of St. Francis (California)
Concilio Latino de Salud, Inc. (Arizona)
Consejo Counseling & Referral Service (Washington)
County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) (California)
Crisis Center & Women's Shelter (Iowa)
Crittenton Services for Children and Families (California)
Cross-Lines Community Outreach (Kansas)
CWLA
Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption
Detroit Federation of Teachers (Michigan)
Disciples Justice Action Network (Maryland)
Diocesan Migrant & Refugee Services, Inc. (Texas)
Empowerment Center (DC)
Everman Independent School District (Texas)
Every Child Matters Education Fund
Family Empowerment Services (Texas)
Family Services of Western Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania)
Farmworker Association of Florida (Florida)
First Church Shelter (Massachusetts)
Forum for Youth Investment

Foster Family Treatment Association (FFTA)
Franciscan Action Network
General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Church (DC)
Generations United
Georgia Alliance to End Homelessness (Georgia)
Georgia Rural Urban Summit (Georgia)
Global Justice Institute, Metropolitan Community Churches (New York)
Green Mountain United Way (Vermont)
Grossman Law, LLC (Maryland)
Habitat Humanite (Quebec)
Hawai'i Alliance for Community-Based Economic Development (HACBED) (Hawai'i)
Hmong, Mien, Lao Community Action Network (California)
Housing Authority of the County of Beaver (HACB) (Pennsylvania)
Human Rights Initiative of North Texas (Texas)
HumanitariansFirst (Pennsylvania)
IHM Justice, Peace and Sustainability Office (Michigan)
Independent Living Inc. (New York)
International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (New York)
Jewish Family & Children's Service (Arizona)
Justice Peace Integrity of Creation (North Carolina)
Juvenile Law Center (Pennsylvania)
Kingsport Housing & Redevelopment Authority (Tennessee)
Law Office of Karen J. Crawford (Texas)
Law Offices of Dominick M. Saia (Colorado)
Larkin Street Youth Services (California)
Lawyers For Children (New York)
Legal Advocates for Children and Youth (California)
Little Sisters of the Assumption (New York)
LULAC Council 4609 (Virginia)
Mahoning Youngstown Community Action Partnership (Ohio)
Maryland United for Peace and Justice (Maryland)
MassDems (Massachusetts)
MOVIMIENTO MIGRANTE MESOAMERICANO (California)
Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid (Minnesota)
Minnesota Council of Child Caring Agencies (Minnesota)
Missouri Association for Social Welfare (Missouri)

MN United for Social Justice (Minnesota)
Mutual Housing California (California)
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Association for Children's Behavioral Health
National Association of Counsel for Children
National Association of County Human Services Administrators (NACHSA)
National Association of Social Workers (Georgia)
National CASA Association
National Center for Adoption Law & Policy
National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP)
National Council of La Raza (NCLR)
National Foster Parent Association
NE Sisters of Mercy Justice Council (Rhode Island)
Newman Oratory (New York)
North American Council on Adoptable Children
North Carolina Council of Churches (North Carolina)
Northern Manhattan Perinatal Partnership, Inc (New York)
Northlake Seamsters' Union (Washington)
On the Capitol Doorstep (California)
Orrville Area United Way (Ohio)
Organizing for America (Washington)
PathWays PA (Pennsylvania)
Peaceful Yoga (Texas)
Pennsylvania Council of Churches (Pennsylvania)
People's Emergency Center (Pennsylvania)
Perretta Law Office (Utah)
PeterCares House (Maryland)
Princeton Community Village (New Jersey)
Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (Nevada)
Progressive Priorities US (Ohio)
Protecting Arizona's Family Coalition (PAFCO) (Arizona)
Public Counsel (California)
Refugio del Rio Grande (Texas)
Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, Western American Province (California)
Renew & Sustain Consulting (Maryland)
Rutgers Child Advocacy Clinic (New Jersey)

Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network (Colorado)
S.A.F.E. House (Nevada)
Sacramento Occupational Advancement (California)
Samson Trust (Massachusetts)
SC Appleseed Legal Justice Center (South Carolina)
School Social Work Association of America
Servicios de La Raza (Colorado)
Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College (New York)
Sin Fronteras (California)
Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, New Windsor (New York)
Sisters of Mercy (Tennessee)
Sisters of Mercy West Midwest Justice Team (Nebraska)
Sisters of St. Francis (Iowa)
SISTERS OF SOCIAL SERVICE (New York)
Siuslaw Area Partnership to Prevent Substance Abuse (Oregon)
Sonja Ann Becker, P.C. (Colorado)
South Carolina Immigrant Victim Network (South Carolina)
Southwest Human Development (Arizona)
Spanish Education for Women (DC)
Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (New Jersey)
St Joseph County Prosperity Building Campaign (Indiana)
St. Louis Center for Family Development (Missouri)
Texans Care for Children (Texas)
The Ave Project (Washington)
The CALL of Johnson County (Arkansas)
The Florence Immigrant & Refugee Rights Project (Arizona)
The Good Shephard of Northeast Fl, Inc. (Florida)
The National Association of Social Workers
The National Crittenton Foundation
Trinity Metropolitan Community Church (Florida)
U.S. Province, Union of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (New York)
United Way of Beaver County (Pennsylvania)
Upper Valley Education Institute (New Hampshire)
Virginia Organizing (Virginia)
Virginia Poverty Law Center (Virginia)
Voice for Adoption

Voices for America's Children

Voices for Utah Children (Utah)

YWCA of the Greater Capital Region, Inc. (New York)

Waging Nonviolence (New York)

Wellspring United Church of Christ (Virginia)

Westchester for Change (New York)

Western Center on Law and Poverty (California)

West Side Town Hall Steering Committee (Arizona)

Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (Wisconsin)

Women's Refugee Commission