



# Time for Reform

TOO MANY BIRTHDAYS IN FOSTER CARE



**KIDS ARE WAITING**  
Fix Foster Care Now

# Time for Reform

## TOO MANY BIRTHDAYS IN FOSTER CARE



*From left to right:  
Latricia Johnson, Kimberly  
Brown-Riley, Sunika Carter,  
and Natasha Jackson, Foster  
Youth Seen and Heard,  
University of Illinois at  
Urbana-Champaign*

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All of the quotes and stories contained in this document come from youth who are currently in foster care or young adults who were in the system at some point in their lives. We want to extend special thanks to all those who generously shared their stories and experiences to highlight the need for national foster care reform. This information was obtained from six sources:

- Writings, interviews, and discussions with current and former participants of Project FYSH—Foster Youth Seen and Heard at the Children and Family Research Center. FYSH was established in 2003 with funds from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services to give voice to the feelings and opinions of current foster youth through writing and art.
- Telephone interviews conducted with young adults who had been in the foster care system earlier in their lives.

- Individuals who participated in community forums that were conducted throughout 2005 and 2006, by the North American Council on Adoptable Children to promote the recommendations of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. Current and former foster youth, adoptive parents, kinship caregivers, and parents whose lives had been touched by the foster care system were invited to participate.
- Members of FosterClub who have provided their comments to various discussion topics. FosterClub is the national network for young people in foster care. For more than 513,000 children living in the foster care system across the country, childhood has been interrupted by abuse, neglect or abandonment. FosterClub is their club: a place to turn for advice, information, and hope. Members are resilient young people determined to build a better future for themselves and for other kids coming up through the system behind them. Learn more about FosterClub or how you can support young people in foster care at [www.fosterclub.com](http://www.fosterclub.com).
- The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative which brings together the people, systems and resources necessary to assist youth in foster care to make successful transitions to adulthood.
- Foster Care Alumni of America (FCAA): *Connecting Today... Transforming Tomorrow*, a national, independent non-profit organization founded and led by alumni of the foster care system. FCAA is the only national organization that provides opportunities for alumni of foster care to join together and to use their experiences and power to effect positive change.

The views expressed here represent those of The Pew Charitable Trusts and not necessarily of the individuals acknowledged above.

The report was designed by Freedom by Design, Inc. The children pictured on the cover are models and the photo is used for illustrative purposes only. The image is licensed from Getty Images. The youth pictured within are photos provided by Mary Nugent Twigg and [www.FosterClub.com](http://www.FosterClub.com).



*"A typical birthday was one of the saddest times in foster care. ... at times someone would say 'Happy Birthday, Josh,'*

*but usually the day was silent. I would feel worthless, like no one valued my life."*

JOSH

*FosterClub member, Oregon*

*"It is very hard in the foster care system. While living in these different places I had to transform myself and pretend to be someone I wasn't in fear that I would be moved again and unloved. I felt like I was constantly moving, and never had a place to call home. I was always wondering when someone was going to give me a chance and not give up on me as everyone has. I felt voiceless because everyone made decisions for my life without asking what I wanted, and would ignore me when I tried to speak up."*

KAMIKA

*Former foster youth, California*

*"My problem at the time was that I connected with people too quick. I got close to people and that was a problem when I had to leave. Even if you feel like you can trust that person—and you can—when the time comes for you to leave, you know you are never going to see them again."*

LAMARR

*Former foster youth, New York*

## FOSTER CARE AT A GLANCE: LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

This report provides an introduction to the foster care system and describes what life is like for the more than 500,000 children in foster care who are waiting for reforms that would help them return to their families or find new permanent families. Foster care provides a temporary place for children and youth to stay when they are removed from their families because of abuse or neglect. But what was intended as a temporary solution has become a long-term state of uncertainty for many children. The reality is that too many children spend too many birthdays in foster care. On average, children in foster care will spend at least two birthdays in the system. Each year, more than 24,000 teens “celebrate” their birthday by aging out of the foster care system without ever having been placed with a permanent family to call their own.

Periodically, newspapers report foster care tragedies—stories of children where the efforts of the child welfare agency proved to be too little, too late, or where a child was removed from his or her family only to be abused or neglected by foster parents. There are, however, many important success stories for children in foster care.

Foster care provides a crucial safety net for hundreds of thousand of children who have experienced abuse and neglect and cannot remain safely with their families. Social workers, attorneys, judges and others ensure that children are safe and receiving the services they need while working with their families to resolve the problems that brought their children into care. And, after decades of growth, the number of children in foster care has been on a steady decline, falling from 552,000 children in care in 2000 to 513,000 children in care in 2005.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and the efforts of child welfare agencies all over the country, more and more children are leaving foster care each year through adoption and permanent legal guardianship when reunification is not possible. Adoptions from the nation's foster care system increased 46 percent between 1996 and 2005—from 27,761 to 51,000. In 2005, nearly 13,000 children left care to guardianship.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these important gains, many challenges remain. Some children enter foster care when preventive services might have kept them safely with their families; too many children remain in foster care too long, waiting to return home or for families through adoption or guardianship; and services are often unavailable for families after children leave foster care. One key reason for these ongoing challenges is the structure of the nation's current child welfare financing system which encourages an over-reliance on foster care. Federal dollars represent the largest share of money spent collectively by federal, state and local governments on child welfare; as a result, the federal financing structure has a dominant influence on the lives of children in care. According to the Urban Institute, the federal government invests roughly \$3.8 billion in out-of-home care each year.<sup>3</sup> This federal financing structure results in the widespread use of foster care services instead of other services that could either prevent the need for a foster care placement or reduce the time a child spends in care. Sadly, inflexible federal funding streams bring with them a number of restrictions that tend to extend rather than reduce a child's time in foster care.



*"I remember that I would always hope that the staff at the group home would not forget (my birthday) and*

*they always did, but sometimes the peers in my group would remember. For the most part I would only get a 'Happy Birthday.' However, three out of the four and a half years it was not even recognized."*

BECCA

*FosterClub member, Indiana*

*"If the government or those who are in power [want] to make the foster care system better, what they should do is just ask a foster kid. Talk to one of them. They can tell you exactly what they need. What they need is what most children and even teens need...Someone who cares about them, someone who will listen to them and hold them when they are scared. What they need is what any child needs...a family who loves them."*

LUIS

*Former foster youth, Massachusetts*

*"It's about my entire life, it's not just about my childhood. I want to know that I'm going to have (someone) to walk me down the aisle. That I'm going to have grandparents for my children."*

MARY

*Former foster youth, Tennessee*

Foster care is necessary to protect vulnerable children, but no one would argue that being in foster care is better than living with a safe, permanent family of one's own. While in foster care, children are wards of the state, waiting in limbo for a court to decide what will happen to them. Sometimes they are removed from their families with only the clothes on their back. They are often uprooted from all that is familiar. They may not have been told where they are going, or understand why they are being taken away from the only family they know. They have little to no say about where they will live or whether they will be able to see their biological family again. Children will likely be moved from one foster placement to another—three times on average—with some children moving more than 10 times. Their medical records may be incomplete because of multiple moves from one foster placement to another. They may fall behind in their education because they are moved in and out of schools as their placements change. In most communities, there are not enough foster families who are able to care for large sibling groups, and as a result, children can be separated from their brothers and sisters and placed with different families. In addition, the lack of foster families for teens may mean that children are placed in group or institutional settings even though they could and should be cared for by families.

Federal financing reform of foster care would help address some of these problems, and several possible strategies have been proposed, including comprehensive recommendations issued by the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, a national, nonpartisan, blue ribbon panel of child welfare, policy, and judicial leaders and others with a stake in the foster care system.

As the stories and quotes in this guide to the foster care system illustrate, children and youth in foster care often feel scared, alone and unwanted, and they long for a safe, permanent family of their own. Although we will never be able to eliminate the need for this vital safety net, there are meaningful reforms that could be undertaken to help many of these children and reduce the length of time they languish in the system.

## WHAT IS FOSTER CARE?

Foster care was designed as a temporary solution for children who have experienced abuse or neglect and need to be removed from their families. Children are placed with foster families or in group care facilities while case workers and judges attempt to stabilize families so that safe reunification is possible. About 50% of children who enter foster care are reunited with their birth family.<sup>4</sup> When reunification is not possible, the child welfare system attempts to find children permanent families through adoption or guardianship.

## HOW IS FOSTER CARE FUNDED?

States are required by federal law to protect all children removed from their families due to abuse or neglect. The federal government contributes financial resources to the states to support some of these children through a number of funding streams, including two major dedicated sources in the Social Security Act, Titles IV-E and IV-B. The majority of federal funds are earmarked to provide foster care services. About half of these children benefit from a combination of federal, state and/or local dollars; the remainder is supported by state and local dollars. For more details about federal funding of foster care, see Appendix A.



*"I tried really hard to remember a birthday I had while in foster care, it is really hard to remember doing anything*

*of any importance. The most I can recall was getting balloons at school from a friend one year and my sister telling me 'Happy Birthday'. I don't recall my birthdays as being anything too special."*

NICOLE

*FosterClub member, Oregon*

*"For me a typical birthday in foster care depended on what foster home I was in. I remember ones that had no meaning and were barely celebrated and on the other hand I remember ones that were fun and exciting, because the foster family cared enough to remember and take the time to celebrate."*

ANGELA

*FosterClub member, Oregon*

## HOW DO CHILDREN ENTER FOSTER CARE?

Children most often come to the attention of the child welfare system when citizens, family members, teachers, or medical professionals call the local child protection agency to report suspected abuse or neglect. When the information provided in the abuse/neglect report indicates that a child is at risk of harm, a child protective services investigator begins an investigation.

Most states require child protective services investigators to respond to reports within specific time limits: often immediately or within 24 hours when the report is very serious or an emergency, and from 24 hours to 14 days when the report is less serious.<sup>5</sup> Through observation, assessment and interviews, the child protective services investigator determines whether the child has been abused or neglected. If the evidence does not support a finding of abuse or neglect, the report is said to be "unfounded" and the case is closed. If there is evidence of abuse or neglect, the report is "substantiated" and the child protective services investigator makes one of three recommendations:

- If the child is no longer at risk of harm, the investigator may decide that no further involvement with the family is necessary. For example, if the person responsible for harming the child, such as a boyfriend or baby-sitter, is no longer involved in the child's care, the case may be closed.
- If the investigator determines that the child is at risk but can safely remain in the home with services, the case remains open and services are provided to the family.
- If the investigator determines that the child is in imminent danger, a court order may be sought permitting removal of the child from the home. In extremely dangerous situations, the investigator may immediately remove the child from the parents' custody. In these cases, the investigator must obtain the court's approval for the removal within a very short period of time, often within 24 to 48 hours, depending on the state's law. The child will remain in foster care pending the court's approval of the child's removal from parental custody.

In some instances, law enforcement officers remove children from their parents' custody. These removals may take place when a parent is arrested. In most communities, law enforcement officials immediately contact the child welfare agency to coordinate the placement of children in foster care.

In 2004, about 3 million referrals involving 5.5 million children were made to child protective service agencies in the United States. Approximately 872,000 of these children were found to be victims of child abuse or neglect. Of those children found to have been abused or neglected, an estimated 311,000 children were removed from their homes and placed in foster care.<sup>6</sup>



## *Melanie's Story*

Melanie bounced in and out of the foster care system in Tennessee starting when she was two years old. Her mother had grown up in foster care and did not have a support network or good coping or parenting skills. As a result, Melanie's mother was not able to properly care for her. Melanie recalls the loneliness, abuse, and concern for her safety while in her mother's care. "I remember one time being on the streets and not having enough food to eat. Another time, I woke up in the middle of the night alone in a homeless shelter with my mother no where to be found."

Melanie spent almost her entire childhood in the foster care system. She and her younger brother were placed together, until at age 13, he was returned to his father, leaving Melanie without her only consistent family member. "My brother felt guilty about leaving me but I reminded him of all those nights we had prayed that we would get a family."

She can't remember exactly how many foster homes she was placed in but she thinks it had to be 20 before she was 12 years old. Melanie recalls how she got so used to moving that she actually started to look forward to it, praying that the next home would be a good home that would last forever. One of things that Melanie remembers most about the moves is their abruptness: "Sometimes in the middle of night cop cars would show up and our stuff would be packed into garbage bags and we knew it was time to go." Along with other things, Melanie's school work suffered as she changed schools almost as frequently as her placements. Her grades plummeted and she had difficulty mastering basic skills.

At age 18, Melanie "aged out" of foster care. Due to the constant moving, Melanie did not have any emotional attachment to any of her foster homes. "I never stayed anywhere long enough to connect with the people I lived with; besides, there is a big distinction between a home and a family."

Despite the fact that she was constantly told that she would be a failure and end up like her mother, Melanie was determined to attend college. Without a family to support her or provide financial assistance, Melanie persevered and obtained undergraduate and master's degrees. Melanie speaks eloquently about how it is still challenging as an adult without any ties to her biological family. "I am 27 today and I still have to remember that I am not a foster child. It really takes away the childhood from you. Somehow the child in care is not only characterized by the experience but defined by the experience, thereby making it impossible to forget."

*"I sat at DHR (the child protective services agency) what seemed like an eternity. I was hungry and unsure of what was happening. All I knew was that I was safe for now. I was so happy about that, but I was also nervous, especially of court and my future, my friends, my school. They finally found me a placement around dusk. They were beginning to think I would need to stay at a homeless shelter and they didn't want to scare me the first day I think."*

SUNSHINE

*FosterClub member, Alabama*

*"I'm now staying with a foster parent who has another girl but she is away at school. I can't stay here long and they don't know where to put me. It's really sad to wake up thinking, 'Where are they going to move me to today? Will I be able to see my friends before I go?'"*

MICHELLE

*FosterClub member, Vermont*

*"In one year, I probably went through like 20 social workers. They was quitting, they was transferred, nobody got close to you, so how could they know you?"*

ANONYMOUS YOUTH

*Formerly in foster care, New York*

## WHAT HAPPENS ONCE CHILDREN ENTER FOSTER CARE?

Once the court has decided that a child should be removed from his or her parent's custody and placed in foster care, the birth parents and the child are assigned caseworkers. Federal law requires that all children have a "permanency goal"—that is, there must be a clearly defined plan for the child to safely leave foster care. The initial goal for almost all children who enter the system is to return to their birth parents' care. However, when reunification is not possible, an alternate plan is developed for the child, which usually is adoption or guardianship. Some children—particularly older children—have no plan for a permanent family. The case goal that they are assigned is simply to age out or emancipate from foster care. In reality, however, when youth leave care, many of them eventually end up returning to their birth families.

## WHAT ARE THE CASEWORKER'S RESPONSIBILITIES?

Caseworkers interact directly with children and their families once they enter foster care. They are responsible for ensuring that children are safe; that their physical health, mental health, and educational needs are met; and that plans are being made to ensure that they have permanent families – through safe return home or through adoption or guardianship. Caseworkers are also responsible for ensuring that biological families receive the services they need to try to resolve the problems that brought their children into foster care in the first place. Caseworkers develop case plans that provide a "road map" of services and tasks for all parties – the birth parents, the foster parents and the caseworker. In addition to providing direct services for children and families, caseworkers typically have many additional responsibilities, including finding emergency foster care placements for children who may enter foster care in the middle of the night; determining whether a child's family's income will allow the state to receive federal financial assistance for the child; recruiting and training foster and adoptive families; providing follow-up services for children who are returned to their birth families; and reporting to the court.

Caseworkers typically have large caseloads. Although national standards suggest that caseworkers should serve between 12 and 15 children,<sup>7</sup> many caseworkers have higher caseloads that exceed the national standards. With high caseloads, it is challenging for caseworkers to meet their range of responsibilities for all children in their care, and heavy workloads are a key factor in caseworkers' decisions to leave their positions. The result is sometimes a lack of continuity of workers for some children, which makes it more difficult to pursue permanency planning for a child.

## WHERE DO CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE LIVE?

Children are placed in a variety of foster settings, including emergency shelters, emergency foster families, longer-term foster families, relative foster homes, and group homes and institutions. Of the estimated 513,000 children in foster care in 2005, 46 percent were in non-relative foster family homes, 24 percent were in relative foster homes, 18 percent were in group homes or institutions, and 11 percent were in other placement settings.<sup>8</sup> Most states limit the number of children who can live with a foster family, although the maximum can range up to 5, 6 and even 10 children (The total number often includes the foster parent's own children and foster children.) Group homes range in size from 4 to 12 children, and institutional settings may have hundreds of children.



*"A birthday is supposed to be a celebratory day... but not when I was in foster care... Birthdays seemed to be more of a burden*

*on the families that I lived with...since it was in the summer time...I was often told to count any type of summer 'family' outings/road trip's/vacations as a Birthday celebration, or my sis and I would sometime combine them...So my birthday's were impersonal, combined with "family" outings...and really just swimming with friends was considered a celebration...I don't remember the cake, presents, and party favors... Actually when I moved around the most in foster care which was during my high school years, I don't remember celebrating my birthday at all...I only remember my case-worker sending me a card, and that meant the world to me."*

LUPE

*FosterClub member, Arizona*

*"Anything I wanted to do had to be run past the Department of Human Services. Very basic things that a parent normally decides for a child. In some cases some person who never met me would have to be consulted [on things like] school field trips, getting my hair cut and other ridiculous things that I don't feel like a person who has never met me is more authorized to make... than the adults who know and love me."*

JACKIE

*Former foster youth, Iowa*

## WHAT IS LIFE IN FOSTER CARE LIKE?

Just like all children, children in foster care attend school and need to do homework. They go to the doctor and dentist, which is covered under the Medicaid program in most states. But, a child living in foster care has anything but a 'normal' childhood. Under federal standards, a foster child is to be visited at least once a month by a case-worker.

Many routine activities of childhood become difficult and time-consuming for children in foster care and their foster families. School trips, pictures, immunizations and sleep overs may involve extra steps involving a social worker or meeting additional requirements. Children in foster care may not be able to go on out of state field trips or have school pictures taken without state permission. Foster children may only sleep over at a friend's house if the all the adults in the friend's house have had background checks. Any travel beyond a certain number of miles or across state boundaries requires permission from the case worker, so visits to grandmother's house for the holidays require extra paperwork and planning. Children in foster care may feel different from other children in their classes and communities. They live with the label of being a "foster child." Many speak of feeling unwanted, scared, angry and frustrated with the lack of control over their lives. In the life of a child, government—even at its best—is a poor substitute for a permanent family.

Some children in foster care will be moved many times while in care—three times on average—and for some, more than 10 times. Sometimes, moving makes it possible for siblings to live together in one home. However, moves may also occur because services have not been provided to foster parents to support them in meeting the child's needs or the child has not received critical mental health services and his behavior has become extremely difficult to manage. With each move, friends are lost, school progress may be delayed and an entirely new set of rules and expectations of a new home must be learned.

## WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOSTER PARENTS MUST MEET?

States have varying requirements for foster parents, though there are some national standards such as criminal record checks, and child abuse and neglect background checks for all members of the household. Prospective foster parents, who may be single adults or couples, must complete an application and licensing, or what is also known as the home study process. The licensing process includes interviews to ensure the home meets basic licensing requirements, verification of income, references who can speak to the individual's or couple's character, and completion of a pre-service training program. There is wide variation among states in the required number of training hours, from six hours in Minnesota to more than 32 hours in Utah.<sup>9</sup>

Once foster parents are licensed, they must periodically have their home re-inspected to ensure it is still in compliance with the licensing regulations and that they continue to meet the other requirements. The foster parents must inform the agency of any new adults who move into the home so that the required background checks can be completed. Most states require foster parents to complete a minimum number of in-service training hours annually, but the range varies, from only a few hours to more than 20 hours each year. Training content varies widely as well.

*"Out of all of my names...titles, labels, identities...foster child... hurt the most – it was my biggest secret...my biggest shame. It meant that I was unwanted. I was a foster child."*

KIMBERLY

*Former foster youth, Illinois*

*"It is hard to be moved around all the time. Permanency is important because then we can feel like we belong and settle, [r]ather than get moved around and feel worthless because we feel that no one wants us."*

KAYLEE

*FosterClub member, Arkansas*

*"It seemed that every time I turned around I was being moved from home to home. For a while I didn't even know if I would be staying the night at some places. After a while I had this dream in my head that I was on a highway and it seems as if the road never ends and my bags are packed in the car. I have no idea where I'm going and it seems like I'll never stop moving."*

DOMINIQUE

*Foster youth, Illinois*

Relatives caring for children in the foster care system may or may not be licensed. Safety screenings are conducted for all relatives who care for a child in foster care. Many relatives meet the same standards as unrelated, licensed foster parents and become licensed. Not all relatives, however, are able to meet all state licensing requirements, such as having the requisite square footage in their homes. Relatives who do not meet these licensing requirements may be approved to care for a child, but they do not receive the same financial support as licensed relatives and licensed unrelated foster parents. The federal government does not share in the costs of foster care or child placement services for children living with relatives who do not meet licensing requirements.

## HOW MUCH SUPPORT DO FOSTER PARENTS RECEIVE?

States vary widely in the amount of money provided to foster families for the care and support of a foster child. The subsidy is intended to cover costs associated with the child's care, including food, shelter, clothing, and allowance. From state to state, the range for these subsidies is large, from \$222 to \$899 per child per month, depending on the state and age of the child. The national average ranges between \$435 and \$519 per child per month, with the subsidy increasing slightly as the child ages.<sup>10</sup> By way of comparison, the US Department of Agriculture estimates the cost to care for a child monthly to be between \$852 to \$941 depending on the age and income of the family (2005 figures).<sup>11</sup> Appendix B provides state-specific information on foster care subsidies. If a child is determined to have unique needs related to their physical or mental health, the subsidy may be increased to cover costs associated with the child's special needs. In some instances, states may offer additional support to foster parents by reimbursing them for travel required for medical appointments, respite care, child care, and tutoring or other educational services. Foster parents caring for children with disabilities are often eligible for special assistance and higher payments to help them meet these children's needs.

## HOW DO CHILDREN LEAVE FOSTER CARE?

Most children leave foster care in one of four ways: they return to the care of their parents; they are adopted; they are placed with a family through guardianship, often with relatives; or they age out of foster care at age 18 or older. Federal data show that 50 percent of all children exiting care in 2005 were in care for 12 months or less.<sup>12</sup> A significant number of children, however, remain in foster care year after year—with the typical child spending more than two years of his or her life in foster care.

Decisions about what happens to a child are made by the relevant court, which holds periodic hearings to review each child's case. Caseworkers, special child advocates (guardians ad litem or Court Appointed Special Advocates), and occasionally parents and youth will make recommendations or statements, but ultimately a judge decides if a child is reunified, adopted, placed with legal guardians, or remains in care.

Although the number varies from year to year, roughly 287,000 children leave foster care annually. More than half of the children who left foster care in 2005 (54 percent) returned to their birth parents or caregiver.<sup>13</sup> For some children, reunification with parents is not possible. In many of these cases, courts terminate parental rights and children are then available to be adopted—by foster parents, by relatives, or by new families. Eighteen percent of children who left foster care in 2005 left by way of adoption (51,323 children).<sup>14</sup> About 60 percent of foster children who were adopted in



*"(F)or me it (the average birthday) was really, business as usual. The day never seemed any more special than any of the others to*

*anyone but myself. To me though, a birthday is one of the only days actually worth celebrating well. There is a cliché Jewish toast "le chaim" which means simply "to life"; one of the most beautiful statements I have ever heard. I really feel like the toast says it all. How could anyone not wish to celebrate life? Such it was though, that I ended up only sometimes remembering that it was my birthday, and usually I only recognized that fact in passing by silently telling myself, 'le chaim'."*

TIMOTHY

*FosterClub, Washington*

*"I remember when I was in a group home I told everyone the same thing: find me a family. I thought about it every day. Nothing else was as important to me as finding a family I could call my own."*

NICHOLAS

*Former foster youth, Illinois*

*"When I won the Youth Spirit Award, it was exciting. And I have won many awards and things at school, too. But every time I walked up to receive my award, there was no family there to see me get it. Other kids had a mom or a dad to watch them get their award. It should have been a happy occasion. But for me ... I wish I had a family there for me."*

ANNA MARIA

*Former foster youth, Connecticut*

2005 were adopted by their foster parents.<sup>15</sup> Some children leave foster care to live permanently with relatives without continuing financial support from the child welfare system (11 percent of children in 2005) or through permanent, legal guardianships with a caregiver (4 percent in 2005).<sup>16</sup>

In 2005, close to 25,000 youth – more than 2,000 a month – left foster care at age 18 or older to live on their own, accounting for 9 percent of all children exiting foster care that year. These children represent an especially vulnerable population, as these youth leave care without the support of permanent families to assist in their transition to adulthood.\*

Some children who leave foster care return when they experience further abuse or neglect. The percentage of children who return to foster care within 12 months varies from state to state. Data from 2003 show that in some states, as few as 5 percent of foster children return to care within 12 months, while in other states, at least 20 percent of foster children re-enter within 12 months.<sup>17</sup>

## MORE THAN 500,000 CHILDREN ARE WAITING FOR A PERMANENT, SAFE FAMILY

Despite the strides that have been made to reduce the number of children in foster care and to increase the number of children leaving the foster care system through reunification, adoption and legal guardianship, too many children remain in foster care longer than necessary. Some are waiting to return to their birth families, others are waiting to be adopted, and others are hoping to be placed permanently with relatives in legal guardianships.

Like most children, foster youth long for the basic stability that can come from being part of a permanent family. The best way to ensure that children spend as little time in foster care as possible is by supporting the families committed to them, whether these are birth parents, relatives, or an unrelated foster or adoptive family.

## WE CAN DO BETTER: REFORM FEDERAL FOSTER CARE FINANCING TODAY

The current way in which the federal government reimburses states for services to abused and neglected children encourages reliance on foster care over other services that may better serve children and families (See Appendix A for more information about the current child welfare financing structure.) Aligning financial incentives to better reward states for preventing the need for foster care and helping children exit foster care to permanent families could unleash a wave of innovation that would aggressively remove remaining barriers to permanent families.

*The federal financing system should support what's best for children.* By aligning federal funding with services that meet the varying needs of the children and families at risk, we can prevent some children from entering care in the first place. And when children must enter foster care, we can more quickly move them from foster care to the permanent families they deserve.

\* The remaining 4 percent of youth in foster care were transferred to another agency, ran away or died while in foster care.



*"When I was growing up in foster care, birthdays were not that big of deal to me because I really never celebrated them all that often. I*

*might get a birthday card or something of that manner. When it came to gifts, very rarely did I ever get anything or if I did get something it was a hand me down from one of my siblings in the home. To this day I don't celebrate them."*

SCHYLAR

*FosterClub member, Montana*



*"The only birthday that I really remember as being special to me was my Sweet Sixteen. I was placed with an aunt on my father's side;*

*I got to have my 1st official sleep over at a house that seemed like a hotel, with a Jacuzzi and all. However until my sixteenth, a typical birthday for me was no picnic. I hated my birthdays and holidays in general, because I was never with my family and people just treated it like it was any other day. I barely received even a phone call with a simple 'happy birthday'."*

ALISHA

*FosterClub member, Oklahoma*

In 2004, the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, a non-partisan group of leading child welfare experts, legislators, system administrators, judges, foster and adoptive parents and youth, concluded that the federal foster care financing system should be restructured to provide states with greater flexibility and increased incentives and accountability. The Commission issued a set of recommendations for how to accomplish this reform.<sup>18</sup> Many others from across the ideological spectrum have echoed the call for financing reform, which would enable states to:

***Provide more prevention services.*** Currently, only limited federal funds are available to support services designed to keep families together—both before a foster care placement and once a child has returned home. The bulk of federal child welfare funds are reserved for foster care and adoption subsidies and administrative and child placement activities, and cannot be used to help keep birth families safely together.

***Support relative caregivers through federally subsidized guardianship.*** In most states, relatives who agree to become permanent, legal guardians for a child in foster care lose their eligibility for federal financial assistance and services once the child exits foster care (only adoptions continue to receive federal support). Although some relatives decide to adopt their kin, adoption is not a viable option for others. For example, it may not be appropriate to terminate parental rights for a severely disabled parent who physically cannot parent, but wants to remain in the lives of the children who love her. Or an older youth who maintains close ties with his or her birth parents may not want those parental rights terminated. An estimated 20,000 children living in long-term arrangements with relatives today could leave foster care for permanent placements through guardianships, if not for the loss of federal or state child welfare assistance that these families face once the child leaves foster care.<sup>19</sup>

***Better use of federal funding to meet each child's needs.*** The vast majority of federal child welfare funds are restricted for foster care maintenance. With more flexible funds, states could provide services such as drug counseling to support reunification with families when possible. Greater flexibility would also enable states to do more foster or adoptive parent recruitment and provide more post-placement supports for children exiting foster care. From 1994 to 2006, states could apply for federal waivers to remove this financing "straightjacket" and allow them to use these funds in innovative ways to promote greater stability and permanence for children. The ability to apply for and receive waivers expired in 2006, despite the many state waivers that were cost-neutral to the federal government and showed some reduction in the length of time children spent in foster care.

Foster children spend too many birthdays in foster care, waiting for a permanent family to celebrate these and other special days in their lives. Congress could act to help more of these birthday wishes come true. Kids are waiting. It's time for reform.

## APPENDIX A FEDERAL CHILD WELFARE FUNDING <sup>20</sup>

Title IV-E is the major dedicated source of child welfare funding, accounting for 51 percent of federal child welfare spending in state fiscal year (SFY) 2004. It is a permanently authorized, open ended entitlement program that reimburses states for a portion of the cost of maintaining a child in foster care and for a portion of the costs of providing adoption subsidies on behalf of eligible children who are adopted from foster care. Under the Title IV-E foster care program, states may claim federal reimbursement for every income-eligible child who is placed in a licensed foster home or institution. In fiscal year (FY) 2007, federal IV-E foster care expenditures are estimated to be \$4.7 billion.<sup>21</sup> Under the Title IV-E adoption assistance program, states may claim federal reimbursement for income-eligible children with “special needs” who are adopted from foster care.<sup>22</sup> In fiscal year (FY) 2007, federal IV-E adoption assistance expenditures are estimated to be \$2.0 billion.<sup>23</sup> Under Title IV-E, funds are also used for independent living services (the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program) and related Education and Training Vouchers for youth aging out of foster care (\$186 million in FY 2007).<sup>24</sup>

Another major dedicated source of federal child welfare funding is Title IV-B of the Social Security Act. Title IV-B includes two state grant programs: Subpart 1 (Child Welfare Services) and Subpart 2 (Promoting Safe and Stable Families). Although Title IV-B is a flexible source of funding, it is also a relatively small amount of money, accounting for just 5 percent of all federal child welfare spending in (SFY) 2004. Unlike IV-E funds, IV-B funding is a mixture of capped entitlement dollars and discretionary funding—meaning that part of the overall funding level is subject to the annual appropriations process. The FY 2007 appropriations for the two major subparts of Title IV-B totaled \$693 million.<sup>25</sup> Finally, an additional dedicated source of federal child welfare funding is the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (funded at \$95 million in FY 2007).<sup>26</sup>

Other federal funding sources include the Social Services Block Grant (representing 11 percent of all federal child welfare spending in SFY 2004), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families block grant (20 percent), Medicaid (10 percent), and other programs (3 percent).<sup>27</sup>

## APPENDIX B FOSTER CARE BASIC MONTHLY MAINTENANCE RATES FOR CHILDREN AGES 2,9, AND 16, 2004\*

STATES	AGE		
	2	9	16
Alabama	\$410	\$434	\$446
Alaska	\$653	\$580	\$689
Arizona	N/A	N/A	N/A
Arkansas	\$400	\$435	\$475
California	\$425	\$494	\$597
Colorado	N/A	N/A	N/A
Connecticut	\$701	\$717	\$788
Delaware	\$391	\$391	\$504
District of Columbia	\$827	\$827	\$899
Florida	\$354	\$364	\$436
Georgia	\$383	\$405	\$428
Hawaii	\$529	\$529	\$529
Idaho	\$274	\$300	\$431
Illinois	N/A	N/A	N/A
Indiana	\$411	\$468	\$525
Iowa	N/A	N/A	N/A
Kansas	\$568	\$568	\$568
Kentucky	\$591	\$591	\$651
Louisiana	\$380	\$365	\$399
Maine	N/A	N/A	N/A
Maryland	N/A	N/A	N/A
Massachusetts	\$520	\$546	\$565
Michigan	N/A	N/A	N/A
Minnesota	\$524	\$524	\$630
Mississippi	\$325	\$355	\$400
Missouri	\$227	\$277	\$307
Montana	\$450	\$450	\$542
Nebraska	\$222	\$292	\$352
Nevada	N/A	N/A	N/A
New Hampshire	\$350	\$381	\$450
New Jersey	\$420	\$453	\$526
New Mexico	\$408	\$441	\$467
New York	\$419	\$504	\$583
North Carolina	\$390	\$440	\$490
North Dakota	\$351	\$397	\$517
Ohio	N/A	N/A	N/A
Oklahoma	\$335	\$400	\$468
Oregon	\$378	\$393	\$485
Pennsylvania	N/A	N/A	N/A
Rhode Island	\$432	\$409	\$474
South Carolina	N/A	N/A	N/A
South Dakota	\$415	\$415	\$498
Tennessee	\$430	\$495	\$550
Texas	\$608	\$608	\$608
Utah	\$418	\$418	\$479
Vermont	\$517	\$571	\$630
Virginia	\$312	\$365	\$463
Washington	\$370	\$446	\$520
West Virginia	\$600	\$600	\$600
Wisconsin	\$302	\$329	\$391
Wyoming	\$400	\$400	\$400
(N)	(40)	(40)	(40)
National Mean	\$435	\$459	\$519
Minimum	\$222	\$277	\$307
Maximum	\$827	\$827	\$899

\* The Child Welfare League of America. (2005). State Child Welfare Agency Survey. Washington, DC. Please see <http://ndas.cwla.org> for more details about what is included for each state.

# KEY FACTS

## 517,325 AMERICAN CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE ARE WAITING FOR REFORM

Children in foster care would benefit from federal financing reform which would give states the flexibility to use funds to provide services needed before, during and after foster care. Foster care dollars saved could then be reinvested: to reunite children with their families, place them with adoptive families, or provide guardianships when reunification and adoption are not possible.

In the United States, only 9% of federal dollars dedicated for child welfare can be spent flexibly to serve children and families. Approximately \$704 million out of a total of \$7.7 billion child welfare dollars are flexible.

*"Children being removed from their homes is traumatic. In foster care, their voice is often lost, and their decision making power is minimal. Children need to be heard, and every effort needs to be taken to find permanent homes for them."*

VANESSA JONES

Former foster youth,  
program manager, youth services, Child Welfare League of America

### WHO ARE THE NATION'S CHILDREN WAITING IN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM?

517,325 children in foster care

31% of foster children are between the ages of 0 and 5

29% of foster children are between the ages of 6 and 12

40% of foster children are between the ages of 13 and 21

Average # of birthdays a child spends in foster care: 2.5 birthdays (30 months)

42% of children experience three or more foster care placements

19% (96,593) of children live in group care or institutional settings

### WHAT ARE THE NATION'S FOSTER CHILDREN WAITING FOR?

250,790 (48%) are waiting to be reunified with their birth families

116,031 (22%) are waiting to be adopted

Average time foster children have been waiting to be adopted: 42 months

### WHERE DID THE NATION'S CHILDREN GO AFTER LEAVING FOSTER CARE IN 2004?

282,597 children exited foster care

149,154 (54%) were returned to their parents

50,567 (18%) were adopted

32,848 (12%) left to live with relatives or via guardianships

22,741 (8%) "aged out" of foster care at 18 or older

10,722 (4%) left for other reasons (ran away, transferred, died)



**KIDS ARE WAITING**  
Fix Foster Care Now

\*Data from AFCARS (2004), ASPE Claims Reports (2005), and ACF Budget Reports (2005).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> United States Department of Health and Human Services. *AFCARS report #13: preliminary estimates for 2005*. (2006) Available on-line at: [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm) (accessed February 26, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Scarcella, C.A., Bess, R., Zielewski, E.H., Geen, R. (2006). *The cost of protecting vulnerable children V: Understanding state variation in child welfare financing*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of Health and Human Services, AFCARS, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). *Child Maltreatment 2004*. Available on-line at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm04/chaptertwo.htm#response> (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). *Child Maltreatment 2004*. Available on-line at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm04/chaptertwo.htm#response> (accessed March 4, 2007)

<sup>7</sup> Child Welfare League of America. (1995). *Standards of Excellence for Family Foster Care*. Washington, DC: CWLA Press.

<sup>8</sup> United States Department of Health and Human Services, AFCARS report (2006), op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> The National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning (NRCFCPPP)

<sup>10</sup> Child Welfare League of America's 2005 State Child Welfare Agency Survey

<sup>11</sup> Wealthier families tend to spend more to raise a child than poorer families on average. United States Department of Agriculture. *Expenditures on Children by Families*, Available on-line at: <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/Publications/CRC/crc2005.pdf> (accessed March 2, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> United States Department of Health and Human Services, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Guardianship may be the best permanence option for a child when a child is living with a relative who is able to make a permanent commitment but does not want to disrupt an existing family relationship; termination of parental rights goes against a strongly held cultural norm; an adolescent who, after a clear understanding of the options, does not wish to be adopted but desires a permanent connection with his or her relatives or foster family; or a parent's physical, emotional, or cognitive disability prevents him or her from being an active, permanent caregiver but termination of parental rights is undesired or unwarranted. Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care. (2005). *Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanence and Well Being for Children in Foster Care*. Available on-line at:

<http://pewfostercare.org/research/docs/FinalReport.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). *Child Welfare Outcomes 2003*. Available on-line at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cwo03/chapters/chapterthree2003.htm> (accessed March 14, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> More information about the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care can be found at [www.pewfostercare.org](http://www.pewfostercare.org).

<sup>19</sup> Testa, M., Shaver, M., & Miller, J. (2004). *Family ties: Supporting permanence for children in safe and stable foster care with relatives and other caregivers*. Available on-line at: [http://www.fosteringresults.org/results/reports/pew\\_reports\\_10\\_13\\_04\\_alreadyhome.pdf](http://www.fosteringresults.org/results/reports/pew_reports_10_13_04_alreadyhome.pdf) (accessed February 27, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Scarella, Bess, Zielewski, & Geen. (2006). Op cit. This report was utilized in preparing this summary. Other sources are noted.

<sup>21</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families. *Payment to States for Foster Care and Adoption Assistance*, Congressional Budget Justification, FY 2008. Available on-line at: [http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/olab/budget/2008/cj2008/sec3g\\_fc\\_2008cj.pdf](http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/olab/budget/2008/cj2008/sec3g_fc_2008cj.pdf) (accessed February 26, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> For a child in foster care to be eligible for federal adoption assistance, the child cannot or should not be returned to the home of the parents; there exists, with respect to the child, a specific factor, such as ethnic background, age or membership in a sibling group that would make an adoptive placement difficult; and reasonable efforts have been made for unsubsidized placement except where a specific adoptive placement is in the child's best interest. In addition, children must be considered AFDC- or SSI-eligible. Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2004). *Title IV-E and State Adoption Assistance*. Available on-line at: [http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws\\_policies/statutes/sneeds.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/sneeds.pdf) (accessed March 12, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families, FY 2008. Op cit.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families. *Payment to States for Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program and Children and Families Services*. Congressional Budget Justification, FY 2008 Available on-line at: [http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/olab/budget/2008/cj2008/sec3i\\_pssf\\_2008cj.pdf](http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/olab/budget/2008/cj2008/sec3i_pssf_2008cj.pdf) and [http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/olab/budget/2008/cj2008/sec2d\\_cfsp\\_2008cj.pdf](http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/olab/budget/2008/cj2008/sec2d_cfsp_2008cj.pdf) (accessed February 26, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families. *Payment to States for Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program and Children and Family Services*, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families. *Payment to States for Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program and Children and Family Services*, op. cit.

For more information, visit:

KIDS ARE WAITING: FIX FOSTER CARE NOW  
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## ENCLOSED

I am in hiding  
From you and from so many who'd rather not see me  
I am hurting, aching  
From your indifference and from so many who've confused my heart  
What am I to do?  
I have tried to fix our problems  
I am a reactionary person, one who strives to fix all the problems in site  
If I can't fix them, I have to at least find a way to reconcile them in my head  
This brings me to the biggest problem of all  
The fact that you see no problem at all  
Perhaps I am too wishful, I want everything to be wonderful  
But not really, I just want to feel loved  
I know along with love, there comes ups and downs  
Twists and turns of all kinds  
But I'd rather feel than not feel  
I'd rather cry and rejoice, I'd rather live  
I'd rather overcome and settle into it all than to just stand still  
But you won't let me, you make things worse when I try to improve them  
When I try to fix a problem you tell me that it doesn't exist  
I do not want to fight you, so I just comply  
And so, I do not live, I exist.  
I am the Lava inside a volcano  
You cannot see me; you can only see the dark mountain like figure  
One day I will explode, one day you will understand  
One day I will find a solution, I will find happiness  
I will feel loved  
One day you will see me

### BY REBEKAH CHILDERS

Born in Detroit, MI, Rebekah was the third child of seven. She grew up in various homes with relatives, foster parents, as well as her birth parents. Rebekah is currently in college at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign pursuing a bachelor's degree in Advertising.



[www.kidsarewaiting.org](http://www.kidsarewaiting.org)  
[info@kidsarewaiting.org](mailto:info@kidsarewaiting.org)