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Foster care needs national solution

By Donna Butts

More than 6,000 Kentucky children are living in the foster-care system. Despite ample evidence of good outcomes when foster children are placed with grandparents and other relatives, fewer than 10 percent of Kentucky's foster children are being raised by extended family members -- less than half the national average.

Kentucky lawmakers are working on legislation that would require the state to keep foster children with relatives whenever possible. There are many advantages to looking first for extended family who can provide a good home.

Foster children living with relatives have more stable placements, avoiding the repeated movement from home to home experienced by far too many youths in the child welfare system. Additionally, foster children placed with grandparents and other relatives are more likely to live with their brothers and sisters, to attend the same schools and to stay connected to friends and familiar surroundings.

But even when children are in stable foster-care placements with grandparents and other relatives, significant decisions about their care remain in the hands of the courts and the child welfare system. "Grandfamilies" raising children in foster care are subject to regulations that limit the privacy other families take for granted.

Families must appear in court on a regular basis and experience home visits by social workers to continue receiving child welfare support. Furthermore, routine activities -- including immunizations, school pictures and out-of-state trips -- can require prior government approval.

Legal guardianship is a path out of foster care for many children who are placed with relatives. The national, non-partisan Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care proposed changes in current laws that would enable children for whom reunification with their parents or adoption are not an option to exit foster care for a permanent family by subsidizing legal guardianships for relatives.

The Pew Commission observed, "When guardians are also relatives, guardianship can promote healthy ties to a child's extended family, home community and culture."

The lack of guardianship support is a critical roadblock for relatives who may be reluctant to disrupt the relationship between parent and child by adoption, but who are nevertheless prepared to provide a permanent, safe home for the children. Children may

also be more comfortable in a guardianship that avoids the potential confusion of an adoption whereby Grandma becomes Mom, and Mom becomes a sister.

Without federal support for legal guardianships by grandparents and other relatives, many children languish in the foster care system longer than necessary. If Congress were providing support for relatives by subsidizing legal guardianships, an estimated 20,000 children nationwide could leave foster care for permanent homes with relatives

Kentucky lawmakers are focusing on new approaches to assist relatives who provide care for foster kids and on assuring that children remain with their extended families whenever possible.

But Kentucky alone cannot solve this problem. There must be a national solution. Congress should seriously consider the bipartisan Kinship Caregiver Support Act as well as other measures to reform the way the federal government finances the foster care system.

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