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Supporting foster children and grandparents

By Donna Butts

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May is both Foster Care Month and Older American's Month, which makes it an opportune time for Congress to authorize federal support for subsidized guardianships. Congress could achieve a triple win for the foster care system, for grandfamilies raising children, and for some of the 500,000 children in our nation's foster care system - a public policy home run.

Foster care was never intended to be a permanent safety net for vulnerable children. However, by 2004, the average length of time spent in foster care was 30 months. Some children are never placed with permanent families, instead being moved from foster family to foster family. Every 26 minutes, at the age of 18, a child "ages out" of the foster care system, without a permanent family to call their own. In many parts of the country there are simply not enough families willing to step in to care for these children.

The federal child welfare law states that children should be moved out of foster care within 18 months, via one of three paths: reunification with their families, adoption or placement with a legal guardian. For many of the 500,000 children in foster care, reunification with their families or adoption is not possible. For some of these children, subsidized guardianship could be the only option for exiting the system. This option permanently places a child with a grandparent or other relative who becomes the legal guardian, and can provide a positive, nurturing home. At the same time, the guardian receives financial resources, just as foster families do, that make it possible to provide for the child's basic needs.

In its report, "Fostering the Future," the national, nonpartisan Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care recommended that federal guardianship assistance be provided "to all children who leave foster care to live with a permanent legal guardian."

Subsidized guardianship has been tested as a route to permanency for foster children in more than 35 states. Studies have shown that children who live with relatives through subsidized guardianship are better able to remain connected to their cultural and familial roots, and siblings have better chances of staying together. Subsidized guardianships also have been shown to reduce the over-representation of blacks and American Indians in the foster care system.

Despite subsidized guardianship's success, lack of federal support has limited the number of children able to exit foster care to live with a relative who is a legal guardian. Although federal assistance is available to families providing temporary foster care and many families adopting a child from the foster care system, this federal support is not available to relatives who become legal guardians.

By supporting subsidized guardianship, Congress has the opportunity to solve three critical problems:

The foster care system would get help meeting its goal of placing children in safe and stable homes within 18 months of entering foster care, while freeing homes to accept additional children needing foster care.

Grandfamilies would get much-needed financial assistance for raising their relative's child and the option to be given permanent custody of the children in their care.

Most important, children would be well served by being placed in the "safe, permanent families" recommended by experts like the Pew Commission.

Recently Congress held a hearing to examine ways to encourage permanence in the child welfare system. Providing federally-supported subsidized guardianships would help the 20,000 foster children living with relatives exit foster care into the arms of a permanent family. What better way to celebrate National Foster Care and Older American's Months than by improving the foster care system and recognizing the important contributions being made by grandparents and other relatives raising children?

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