

June 21, 2016

The Honorable Paul Ryan
Speaker of the House
United States House of Representatives
H-232 Capitol Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Minority Leader
United States House of Representatives
233 Cannon Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Speaker of the House Ryan and Minority Leader Pelosi:

As organizations representing advocates for children, youth and families, public and private providers, foster parents, adoptive parents, kinship caregivers and alumni of foster care, we are writing in support of the bipartisan, bicameral Family First Prevention Services Act, H.R. 5456. This legislation represents an historic step forward by better aligning federal child welfare funding with improved outcomes and goals for children and families who come into contact with the child welfare system. Over the decades Congress has approved many bipartisan, bicameral child welfare bills to better meet the needs of our most vulnerable children and families, and the Family First Prevention Services Act continues to make important gains for children.

We applaud the historic step the Act takes to increase federal investments in prevention to keep more children safely with their parents or family caregivers and out of foster care. The Act would allow funds under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, now used primarily for out-of-home care for children, to be used for quality mental health and substance abuse prevention and treatment services and in-home parent skill-based programs. Requirements that these new services be evidence-based and trauma-informed, along with data reporting on performance outcomes, helps to ensure the quality of and accountability for services provided. These and other provisions in the Act also recognize the current challenges created by the opioid and heroin crises in many states.

The Family First Prevention Services Act over time also will take important steps to ensure children who need foster care will be placed in the least restrictive setting appropriate to their needs, by targeting federal dollars only on children in family-foster homes or residential settings for children and youth with special treatment needs or those in special circumstances, such as pregnant and parenting teens or older youth in independent living settings. The Act builds on activities in a number of states to preserve group care for children with special treatment needs.

The Act includes a number of other important changes to help improve outcomes for children and families. It continues to recognize the special role grandparents and other relatives play when they step in to care for children when their parents cannot and the supports relative caregivers need; requires states to have a plan to track and prevent child maltreatment fatalities; addresses the special needs of pregnant and parenting teens and protections for their children; promotes permanent families for children by extending adoption and guardianship incentives, enhancing interstate placements of children, and ensuring appropriate investments in post-adoption services; continues the Court Improvement Program; and offers increased supports to help older youth transition from foster care to adulthood.

Children and society pay a high cost when current systems fail to adequately address the needs of the children who come to the attention of our child welfare systems. We believe the specific changes proposed will go far in encouraging state and local child welfare agencies, private providers, courts, and advocates for children and families, including those who have been involved in the child welfare system, to work together to achieve significant change for children over the next decade.

The Family First Prevention Services Act will truly benefit vulnerable children and families who come to the attention of the child welfare system. We urge strong bipartisan support of H.R. 5456. Thank you.

Sincerely,