FOSTER CARE ALUMNI of America

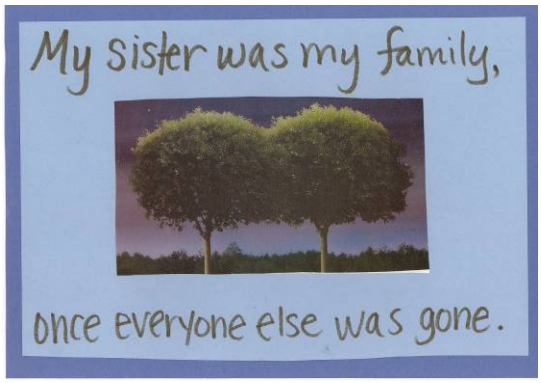
June 18, 2008

The Honorable James McDermott, Chair
The Honorable Jerry Weller, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support
Ways and Means Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman McDermott and Representative Weller,

We are writing on behalf of the 12 million alumni of the foster care system in the United States and the 1,400 members of Foster Care Alumni of America (FCAA) to offer support for "The Fostering Connections to Success Act of 2008." We are pleased with the thoughtful approach you have taken in this legislation to assist children in foster care develop and strengthen bonds to their families and communities. Throughout your careers, you have been tireless advocates for youth in high risk situations. This bill is a reflection of your ongoing commitment to ensuring that all young people have the opportunity to build successful futures through access to affordable health care, a decent education, and the chance to develop healthy, lifelong relationships with family.

As alumni of the foster care system we know that reforms of all kinds are necessary to truly improve the child welfare system. However, increasing opportunities among foster youth to improve bonds with siblings, kin and their communities are essential first steps. The "Fostering Connections to Success Act of 2008" bill achieves these goals in a number of ways.



First, through the new Family Connections Grant program and additional requirements upon states, the bill **provides assurances that states will go to great lengths to keep siblings together and pursue all possible kinship placements before a child is placed into foster care.** We especially appreciate the provision which mandates that youth over the age of 14 have a role in selecting placement

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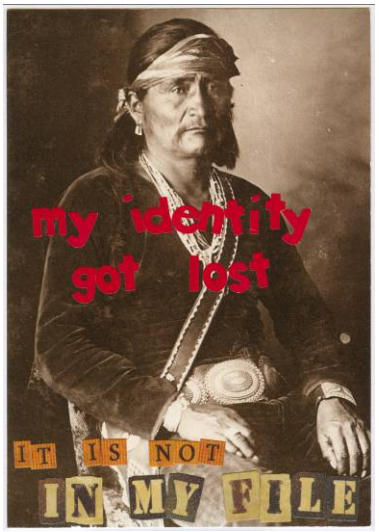
options. As alumni, we recognize the importance of providing youth with some control over their fate in the system.

Second, this bill requires states to develop a plan for the oversight and coordination of health care services and educational stability. This will vastly improve the access of foster youth to both systems. Equally important, this bill requires that the foster care system keep better, more organized records of youth involvement with these systems. Sadly, the inferior record-keeping of foster care systems, and the lack of coordination among foster care, health care and education provides as much of a barrier to young people in care as the shoddy medical and educational services they too often receive. This bill also encourages adults involved in the lives of foster youth to help youth stay in school by withholding foster care and adoption payments for children under 18 who have not completed high school unless the child is in school or home school full time, or is incapable of attending school full time due to a medical condition. Holding young people and families in the foster care system to this high standard is a statement from Congress that lowered expectations are not acceptable for those of us from foster care.



This bill, **extends Title IV-E eligibility for tribal youth**. We know that American Indian children have faced disproportionately large consequences for their need to be part of the child welfare system and we appreciate the attention and commitment to bringing equal support to this group.

We are pleased with the provision in the bill to expand options to **train America's private sector child welfare workforce**. Our members who had positive experiences in foster care often attribute this to the availability of a diligent, competent social worker. These workers exist in both the public and private agencies yet, federal reimbursement rates for training them is not equitable. Conversely, our members who suffered through very difficult experiences, all too often recount having dealt with an overburdened social worker who was ill-equipped to respond to even the most basic request. Your bill acknowledges that social workers in both private and public agencies with the right tools, training, and time can make a positive impact in the lives of children and families.

Finally, the bill addresses the needs of older youth in care in two important ways. The bill encourages states not to give up on finding permanent, loving homes for older youth by doubling the states' adoption incentive payment for older youth. This legislation also offers states the option to extend foster care to age 21. Here, you take seriously the

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challenges of young people who are unable to achieve permanency or to be prepared for total financial and emotional emancipation by age 18. Over 24,000 of our brothers and sisters in care age out of foster care at 18, entering adulthood ill-prepared for independence in numerous ways. States should be encouraged to extend foster care to 21 and use this additional time wisely to provide concrete services and training for older foster youth to support their successful transition to independence.

"The Fostering Connections to Success Act of 2008" places the first step of child welfare reform where it rightly belongs – with the very children and youth the system intends to serve. As such, we are pleased to offer our support to this thoughtful legislation. Thank you for all that you do to improve the lives of America's children, youth and families. Please feel free to contact us at Foster Care Alumni of America to further discuss the urgent concerns of our brothers and sisters in care.

Respectfully,

Nathan Monell,
Chief Executive Officer

Misty Stenslie, MSW
Deputy Director

NOTE: the graphics in this document are postcard art made by people in and from foster care describing their experiences, insights, and what we want others to know about what it means to grow up in foster care. For more information and to see more postcards, visit *www.fostercarealumni.org*.

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