

Supporting the Goals and Ideals of National Adoption Day and National Adoption Month

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October 28, 2009

Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of H. Res. 831, a resolution supporting the goals and ideals of National Adoption Day and National Adoption Month.

I am pleased to have worked with Congresswoman Brown-Waite, Congressman Tiberi, and Congressman McDermott on this legislation.

On any given day, there are over a half million children in our Nation's foster care system, of which nearly 130,000 are waiting for a permanent home through adoption. While 51,000 children found a family to call their own last year through adoption, far too many children in the foster care system remain waiting for some level of permanency.

Adoption provides children who are unable to return to their biological homes with the opportunity to be raised in a safe and loving home, providing them a level of stability that generally cannot be found in foster care.

Adoption is an important option for many children in the foster care system. It allows children to be raised as a member of a new family, a family that will provide the love, security and support that every child deserves.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act supported adoption as an important pathway to permanency. This historic law also recognized the need to support multiple avenues to permanency, given that adoption may not be the best option for all children and families.

I have worked with Representative Jim McDermott and my colleague from Illinois, former Representative Jerry Weller, to include language in the fostering connections law to provide additional opportunities to children in foster care via kinship guardianship. Kinship guardianship gives a child a permanent home with their grandparent or other relative, providing the same level of love, security and support that an adoption home provides but without the termination of parental rights.

An evaluation of Illinois' subsidized guardianship waiver found that children in kinship guardianship fair as well as those in other permanency settings on measures of well-being, including school performance, engagement in risky behaviors, and access to community resources.

A recent GAO report identified kinship guardianship as a key Federal policy to decrease the overrepresentation of African American children in our Nation's child welfare system. African American children enter foster care at higher rates and remain in foster care for longer periods of time when compared to children from other racial or ethnic groups.

Indeed, African American children make up nearly one-third of the children waiting for adoption in this country. There are a variety of reasons why these children remain in the system longer, with one reason being that adoption is not equally availed by families from different races and ethnicities, especially among African American and Native American communities. Research shows that allowing a child to achieve permanency with a relative enhances their development and long-term well-being by maintaining their cultural identity and sense of family belonging, which, understandably, is particularly important for African American and Native American children.

I personally know the value of kinship guardianship because Illinois has been a leader in developing and demonstrating the effectiveness of pioneering child welfare reforms such as kinship guardianship and extension of foster care to age 21, also included in the fostering connections legislation.

In addition to seeing the positive effects of kinship caregiving Statewide, I have seen the importance of kinship guardianship in Chicago. My congressional district has the highest percentage of children living with kinship caregivers in the Nation, followed by the First Congressional District of Illinois with the second highest percentage, and the Second District with the 10th highest percentage in the Nation.

I am proud that the fostering connections law worked to increase adoption and other avenues to permanency such as kinship guardianship to help children find the permanent, safe homes they deserve.

Despite the reforms that we have achieved in this legislation, more work needs to be done to improve the experiences of all children and all families in the system and to end racial disparities that continue to persist.

This spring, I joined with Representative Jim McDermott and Todd Platts to introduce legislation that would provide Federal funding to support evidence-based early childhood home visitation programs. These programs provide important home-based instruction and services to pregnant mothers and families with preschool-age children that help to improve the health and educational outcomes of children and their parents.

A growing body of evidence has found that early childhood home visitation programs serve as an effective child abuse prevention strategy, reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect by nearly 40 percent. Home visiting also produces significant health benefits to children and their families, such as improved child health, child development, parenting skills, and school readiness.

I am pleased that it was included as part of the health care reform proposal that was reported out of the Ways and Means Committee. A similar proposal was included in the health proposal that was reported out of the Senate Finance Committee earlier this month.

I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues to improve our Nation's foster care system through adoption, guardianship, home visitation programs, and other important initiatives.

I ask my colleagues to join me in supporting the ideals and goals of National Adoption Day and National Adoption Month by voting in favor of H. Res. 831.