
NASHVILLE CITY PAPER OP-ED: FIXING FOSTER CARE

Commentary: Fixing Foster Care

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By U.S. Rep. Jim Cooper

How much do you know about our national foster care system? Consider these basic facts:

Each year, more than 800,000 American children are in foster care, most because they have been neglected or abused. Many of the kids do not receive adequate health care and education.

Currently, in Tennessee, there are over 9,000 children in foster care. They are left without supportive, loving families, may be separated from their siblings, and often "age out" of the system without the security of an adoptive family to fall back on.

They are less likely to earn a high school diploma or a bachelor's degree than their peers, and when they grow up, they are less likely to have a job or health insurance.

They are also more likely than their peers to remain unemployed, homeless, and in need of public assistance.

To put it simply, America's abused and neglected children are our greatest national tragedy. These children are everyone's problem because they come from every neighborhood and every zip code.

Though federal and state governments spend over \$25 billion each year to assist foster children, no one thinks that government is capable of raising them well.

The central irony of our struggling child welfare system is that many good, even saintly, people are working in it. They are doing some remarkable things.

The Tennessee Department of Children's Services is reducing the number of foster children in their care by placing them in permanent, loving homes. Nonprofits like Renewal House, Youth Villages, and the Oasis Center work outside of the system to improve the lives of at-risk youth and families. Foster parents and youth are increasingly speaking out about the need for reform.

In Washington, Congress unanimously passed a bill called the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. It marked the most significant reform to the child welfare system in over a decade and was signed into law

last October.

And recently, the House passed a bill to recognize May as National Foster Care Month and reaffirm the commitment of the House to improve the foster care system. We are making progress by raising public awareness.

But there is more work to be done.

As a start, during National Foster Care Month, I encourage everyone to learn more about the foster care system and how it affects our communities. You can visit sites like www.fostercaremonth.org, www.tennessee.gov/youth/fostercare.htm, and www.raisemeup.org to get more information.

In a perfect world, there would be no need for foster care. But if every child cannot be born into a loving family, we should make sure they get the love they need and deserve. Improving these children's futures should be our top priority.

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