



December 8, 2015

The Honorable Orrin Hatch
Chairman
Committee on Finance
United States Senate
219 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Ron Wyden
Ranking Member
Committee on Finance
United States Senate
219 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Hatch and Ranking Member Wyden:

As members of the State Policy Advocacy and Reform Center (SPARC), a coalition of state-based advocacy organizations committed to improving the safety, health and wellbeing of children and families involved in the child welfare system, we are writing to commend your efforts to advance policy changes to better support the needs of vulnerable children and families.

It is our understanding that the Senate Finance Committee is hoping to consider new legislation in the near future, the Family First Act, which is aimed at keeping children safe and supported at home and in family-like settings. Based on briefings and summary documents shared by Finance Committee staff, we understand the Family First Act addresses longstanding barriers in federal child welfare financing by providing, for the first time, targeted new investments of Title IV-E of the Social Security Act in evidence-based prevention, intervention and post-permanency services and supports.

This legislation would also enhance federal resources available under Title IV part B, strengthen support for kinship families, and, importantly, reinforce existing law's goal of placing children in foster care in the least restrictive setting appropriate to their needs. In addition, the legislation draws on child development research and best practice by including provisions to better ensure children, youth and families receive trauma-informed services and that child welfare staff and providers are well-trained to support the unique needs of families.

We appreciate your longstanding commitment to bringing attention to and addressing the widely used practice of housing children and youth in the foster care system in restrictive group care settings. The Family First Act also provides critical reforms to ensure that children are not unnecessarily placed in restrictive settings but rather, in the care of families when possible. It would target federal dollars to smaller family-foster homes and other specialized care settings for pregnant and parenting teens or older youth in independent living settings, as well as settings for children and youth with special treatment needs and creates a process for courts to review these placement settings on an ongoing basis.

As you know, states rely on federal support and a strong federal-state partnership to ensure that they have the resources they need to adequately care for the countless children and families that walk through their agency doors each day. By providing states with access to Title IV-E funds for investments in a range of services for children and families, including prevention and family services, this legislation will be critical in helping build states' capacity to keep children and families together and out of the foster care system.

Congress, and the Finance Committee in particular, has long demonstrated continued leadership and commitment to child welfare reforms. The Family First Act follows a number of critical reforms enacted by Congress in recent years, including the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act (2014), Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (2008) and Child and Family Services Improvement Act (2006) to name a few. This legislation follows recent reforms and is a "game changer," offering a critically important new funding source to support states in their efforts to provide a broad array of effective services to vulnerable children and families.

We thank you and applaud your leadership in proposing new investments in a range of evidence-based and evidence-informed and promising prevention and family services to help keep children and families together and out of the foster care system.

We look forward to working with you to ensure these new child welfare finance reforms will truly benefit children who come to the attention of the child welfare system and to continue to explore additional improvements on their behalf to ensure they all have safe, permanent families. Thank you for your continuing leadership on behalf of these children.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Children and Youth (Maryland)

Advocates for Children of New Jersey

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Family

Child and Family Policy Center (Iowa)

Children's Action Alliance (Arizona)

Children's Advocacy Alliance (Nevada)

Children's Home Society of North Carolina

Citizens' Committee for Children of New York

Connecticut Voices for Children

Facing Foster Care in Alaska

First Focus Campaign for Children

Florida's Children First

Juvenile Law Center (Pennsylvania)

Kentucky Youth Advocates
Massachusetts Law Reform Institute
Michigan's Children
Midwest Foster Care and Adoption Association of Missouri and Kansas
Nebraska Appleseed
Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children
Partners for Our Children (Washington)
Public Policy Center of Mississippi
Schuyler Center for Analysis & Advocacy (New York)
Texans Care for Children
The Mockingbird Society (Washington)
The Villages of Indiana
Voices for Alabama's Children
Voices for Children in Nebraska
Voices for Ohio's Children
Voices for Utah Children
Voices for Vermont's Children
Voices for Virginia's Children
VOICES for Youth (California)
Youth Law Center (California)