SEEING BEYOND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
CREATING CHANGE FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute's Foster Youth Internship Program®

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOREWORD

Early this year, the United States and world experienced the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have all been forced to shut down all non-essential businesses, work from home, social distance, and wear masks. As the spring came into bloom and CCAI prepared for the 2020 Foster Youth Internship (FYI) Program®, we did not feel congressional internships were going to be available nor would it be safe for interns to travel to Washington, D.C. from around the country.

We had to make the tough decision to take the program to a virtual environment! We discussed what was happening in the lives of children and youth during the pandemic and created a modified FYI program: the "Foster Youth Intern COVID-19 Pandemic Working Group." During this challenging time of a global pandemic, combined with this moment of national awareness of issues of racial justice, equity, and inclusion, CCAI is honored to have chosen this group of current and former foster youth and adoptees to participate in our annual FYI Program.

Alan, Autumn, Cortez, Hailey, Ian, Isabelle, Junely, Laila-Rose, Makayla, Melvin, Shanell, and Tashia put a lot of thought and effort into developing their policy reports based on their own personal experience in the child welfare and foster care system. They explored a range of issues from ensuring safety and stability for vulnerable children and families to technology improvements to higher education and housing assistance. To address the three broad lenses of reform, we have organized this report to begin with the individual, then community and family, and lastly, system reform. In the following pages, you are presented with stories of struggle and triumph that culminated into recommendations for Congress to improve the system.

CCAI was provided support for the FYI Program from our Board of Directors, committed staff, and partners. We would like to thank: Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, Carlson Family Foundation, American Council of Life Insurers, Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck, Retail Orphan Initiative, Integrated Legislative Strategies, Bella Grazia Fund, Rita Lewis, Paul & Emily Singer Foundation, Walter S. Johnson Foundation, Arnold & Porter, and ChildFocus.

It is my hope that you are inspired by the work of the Foster Youth Interns!

Nancy Kay Blackwell
CCAI Executive Director
ABOUT CCAI

HISTORY

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) is a nonprofit, bipartisan organization that works to raise awareness about the needs of children without families and to remove policy barriers that hinder them from knowing the love and support a family provides. CCAI is unique in that each of our programs brings together policymakers and individuals with direct foster care or adoption experience. We have found that when policymakers hear direct experiences of those affected by child welfare policy, they become engaged in this issue and work to bring about legislative improvements in an effort to ensure each child has their right to a family realized.

CCAI was founded in 2001 by advocates of the world’s orphaned and foster youth. In founding CCAI, these advocates sought to match the commitment of members of Congress’ Adoption Caucus, the Congressional Coalition on Adoption (CCA), with the information and resources needed to make the dream of a family a reality for every child.

MISSION

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute is dedicated to raising awareness about the millions of children around the world in need of permanent, safe, and loving families and to eliminating the barriers that hinder these children from realizing their basic right to a family.

VISION

Our vision is a world in which every child knows the love and support of a family.
ABOUT THE FYI PROGRAM

The Foster Youth Internship Program® is a signature program of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute.

CCAI’s Foster Youth Internship (FYI) Program® is a highly esteemed internship for young adults who have spent their formative years in U.S. foster care. From 2003 to 2019, the FYI Program provided the Foster Youth Interns (FYIs) the opportunity to intern in a congressional office on Capitol Hill — both exposing the FYIs to the policymaking process as well as raising awareness to federal policymakers about the needs and unique perspectives of those who have spent time in foster care. However, due to COVID-19, congressional internships were cancelled for summer 2020. Instead, the FYI Program continued as a first-ever virtual edition via the Foster Youth Intern COVID-19 Pandemic Working Group.

For the past 12 years, since 2008, the FYI Program has offered the creative and talented Foster Youth Interns the opportunity to use their newfound understanding of Capitol Hill and federal policy to research and write a policy report. The interns focus on topics they are personally passionate about, generally linked to their own experience in foster care, and make policy recommendations to improve the U.S. child welfare system for children who are currently in foster care. This report and its recommendations are disseminated across the country and presented by the interns in briefings to the U.S. Congress, White House Domestic Policy Council, and beginning in 2019, at two additional briefings to industry leaders in the private sector and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

After their time on Capitol Hill, CCAI’s Foster Youth Interns have gone on to work in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, White House, Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Veteran’s Affairs, community banks, law firms, counseling groups, national child welfare organizations, and state child welfare agencies. Many FYIs also pursue degrees of higher education after obtaining undergraduate degrees. Moreover, the FYIs leave Washington, D.C. with experience and skills that continue to bolster their careers and provide a foundation for them to become lifelong advocates for youth in foster care.
ABOUT THE COVID-19 WORKING GROUP

The Foster Youth Intern COVID-19 Pandemic Working Group is a special summer 2020 edition of CCAI’s signature Foster Youth Internship Program®.

The goal of the Foster Youth Intern COVID-19 Pandemic Working Group is to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the United States foster care system. This opportunity allows youth voice with lived experience to influence policymakers on ways to support foster youth and strengthen the child welfare system during and after the pandemic.

The research project was divided into four sub-groups: (1) higher education and well-being, (2) safety and stability, (3) child welfare workforce, and (4) permanency. Each group explored the current state of the topic; highlighted successful local, state, and federal initiatives; and provided innovative federal legislation recommendations based on their research and lived experience. A CCAI staff member led each of the four sub-groups to provide general oversight, guidance, and expertise. Additionally, all Foster Youth Interns were assigned an individual policy report advisor, each a specialist in child welfare policy, practice, or research, to assist in accessing tools, resources, and experts.

This report covers pertinent COVID-19 pandemic child welfare issues such as:

- Ensuring safety and stability for vulnerable children and families
- Technology improvements in the child welfare system
- Supports for foster, adoptive, and kinship families
- Child welfare workforce strengthening
- Educational and housing supports for foster youth
- Tribal colleges/universities higher education supports

Note: The opinions, findings, and conclusions presented in the Foster Youth Internship Program® COVID-19 Pandemic Working Group Policy Report are the authors’ own and do not necessarily reflect the view of CCAI including leadership, donors, and partners.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To keep everyone safe during COVID-19, institutions of higher education have closed their campuses and moved students out of their residence halls. The sudden loss of on-campus housing has been particularly difficult for current and former foster youth who are already at risk of homelessness due to the lack of family, economic supports, and other safety nets available to their peers (Jim Casey, 2014). Housing instability and limited access to other resources has a direct impact on postsecondary completion, including increased dropout rates and greater likelihood of poor academic achievement among foster youth (Rosenberg & Youngmi, 2017). The federal government has a strong responsibility to provide current and former foster youth in postsecondary education settings with the necessary housing, mental health, and social and academic supports to ensure their safety in completing their degrees, especially during COVID-19 and other crises.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Throughout my collegiate experience, I have lived in dorms. While on-campus housing provided a secure living situation during the school year, leaving the dorms during holiday and summer breaks was scary. At times, I was forced to store all my belongings in my car until I could find a safe place to stay until returning to school. Several years ago, I had the opportunity to participate in a summer program that prepared individuals to succeed in college. My university acceptance was contingent on passing my summer program class. While other prospective freshmen were enjoying the freedom of college, I was busy studying and worrying about passing my class so I could go to school and have a stable place to live. In addition to being essential to my academic success, college was also my pathway to reliable housing. I have friends in foster care who experienced and continue to experience similar challenges.
In order to provide adequate services for students who have experienced foster care and homelessness, Congress should:

- **Amend Title VII of the HEA to award formula grants to all states to provide housing, mental health, social and academic supports to current and former foster youth and homeless students pursuing their undergraduate and graduate degrees.** States that receive these grants will be required to award subgrants to institutions of higher education to provide these services in partnership with child welfare agencies and organizations serving homeless youth.

- **Direct the U.S. Department of Education to coordinate its activities under this new grant program with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the other federal agency that administers educational funding programs to foster youth under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act of 1935.** Encouraging states to integrate these funding sources will give students critical supports that are not currently provided by universities, such as transitional housing when campus housing is closed during summer, vacations, and national emergencies. By keeping foster and homeless youth safe, stable, and able to meet their basic needs in times of uncertainty, these federal grants will help students successful complete their postsecondary degrees.

**THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW**

Housing instability for current and former foster youth has only been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a recent poll conducted by FosterClub, a significant number of young people have been forced to leave campus without the time, funds, or connections to find safe, alternative housing. As a result, many have been forced to stay in toxic environments. 39% of these youth reported already having moved out or being fearful that they would be asked to move out of their housing (FosterClub, 2020). Congress already provides funds to postsecondary institutions to help students with supportive housing, but these programs do not go far enough. Student Support Services (SSS), one of the TRIO programs established under Title IV of the HEA, allows but does not require participating institutions to use their funds for housing and other supports for foster and homeless youth. Additionally, not every institution of higher education receives TRIO funds. Current law allows the U.S. Department of Education to establish grants and contracts with institutions of higher education to improve postsecondary and graduate education (Higher Education Opportunities Act, 2008). To better meet the needs of foster care and homeless youth pursuing postsecondary education, Congress should expand these existing programs.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to provide adequate services for students who have experienced foster care and homelessness, Congress should:

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- **Direct the U.S. Department of Education to coordinate its activities under this new grant program with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the other federal agency that administers educational funding programs to foster youth under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act of 1935.** Encouraging states to integrate these funding sources will give students critical supports that are not currently provided by universities, such as transitional housing when campus housing is closed during summer, vacations, and national emergencies. By keeping foster and homeless youth safe, stable, and able to meet their basic needs in times of uncertainty, these federal grants will help students successful complete their postsecondary degrees.
SUPPORTING PREGNANT AND PARENTING YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE IMPACTED BY COVID-19

Junely Merwin

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Congress should take action to quickly connect Pregnant and Parenting Youth (PPY) in foster care with much-needed support, guidance, and basic needs to care for their young children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Congress should authorize Chafee or Title IV-B to allocate funds for basic needs of pregnant and parenting youth in foster care and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should issue guidance to states on how they can meet the needs of expectant and parenting youth in foster care.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pregnant and Parenting Youth (PPY) in the foster care system are in urgent need of assistance, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This vulnerable population faces unique and complex challenges, which include a lack of support systems, resources, and parenting skills. Nurse practitioners and home visitors can be critical in providing PPY with much-needed support to help them succeed and prevent their children from entering foster care.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

At age fifteen, I entered foster care with my one-month-old son in my arms. Raising my son in foster homes was a dehumanizing experience. I had unsupportive foster homes that did not understand how to meet my needs as a teen parent. With no family support to lean on, I was left to navigate a system I did not know. I struggled with the isolation of caring for an infant throughout five years of his life while trying to manage being a teenager, mother, foster youth, and student, all at the same time.
THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Almost half of teen girls who have been in foster care will have had a child by age 19. Of those, many will see their own children removed and placed in foster care (Harkness et al., 2017). Pregnant and Parenting Youth (PPY) face extraordinary challenges as they learn to parent while healing from their own trauma and navigating the foster care system. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the stress, trauma, and isolation that PPY in foster care face. PPY lack the support and services they need to be successful parents. Nurse practitioners and home visitors can be critical in providing PPY with much-needed support and resources to help them address the developmental needs of their children so families can thrive. These additional supports for parenting foster youth will also help prevent a strain on the child welfare system long-term, preventing a whole new group of children from entering foster care when life returns to "normal" in pre-pandemic times.

Congress recognized the unique needs of PPY in foster care in the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) of 2018, which allows states to provide PPY in foster care with prevention services. While this is significant, so much more needs to be done to support PPY during the pandemic and prevent their children from entering foster care.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Congress should take action to connect Pregnant and Parenting Youth (PPY) in foster care with support, guidance, and basic needs to care for their young children during the pandemic:

- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) should issue guidance to states on how they can meet the needs of expectant and parenting youth in foster care, including connections to home visiting services, nurse practitioners, basic needs, healthcare services, and child care, all of which support both the parent(s) and their child(ren)'s development.

- Congress should provide funding through the Chafee or Title IV-B program to support the basic needs of Pregnant and Parenting Youth (PPY) in foster care such as baby needs, diapers, formula, childcare, transportation to doctor appointments, and parenting support services such as home visitation programs.
EXPANDING CULTURAL CONNECTIONS AND EDUCATIONAL SUPPORTS FOR FOSTER YOUTH IN TRIBAL COLLEGES

Shanell Lavallie

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Congress should expand the American Indian Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities (TCCUs) program, authorized under the Higher Education Amendments of 1998, to provide TCCUs funding to establish a program for Tribal students who have experienced foster care, so they can succeed in higher education and connect with their Tribal communities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tribal nations value community as connecting with culture provides a sense of belonging and wholeness. Native American youth are 4.3 times more likely than white children to be removed from their families and communities (Hill, 2019). They tend to remain in out-of-home care significantly longer than their non-Native American counterparts and are too often placed in foster homes outside of their families, tribes, and Indian culture (Fostering Together, n.d.). As a result of this unnecessary separation, Native American foster youth face significant social problems, including a lack of a sense of community and support in overcoming the unique life obstacles. While Tribal Colleges and Universities recognize the importance of strengthening bonds with Tribal communities and culture, they do not always understand the unique needs of foster youth students. This is particularly problematic during the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises in which foster youth experience even greater uncertainty and lack of access to basic resources.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

I have experienced firsthand the generational trauma and community disconnection that make it difficult for Native American foster youth to connect with their own culture. After I was removed from my family and tribe, I endured sexual and emotional abuse in foster care. Over time, I was able to realize this abuse was not acceptable and it did not define me. I found the motivation to enroll at the Division of Education Salish Kootenai College, a private Native American College in Montana, which offers students the ability to apply for financial assistance, find support groups, and other services to help students succeed in higher education. My college supported me as a whole person, including my connections with others and aspirations beyond teaching. I am lucky the support available is aligned with my goals, but luck should not be the reason Tribal foster care students find the resources needed to complete higher education.
THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Section 316 of the Higher Education Amendments of 1998 established the American Indian Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities (TCCUs) program (Hegji, 2017, p. 7). This program provides grants to TCCUs to improve and expand their capacity to serve American Indian students. Grants may be used to carry out certain activities, such as acquiring property near their campuses to construct facilities, establishing or enhancing programs designed to qualify students to teach in elementary and secondary schools (with a particular emphasis on teaching Indian youth), and establishing community outreach programs that encourage Indian elementary and secondary students to develop academic skills and interest in pursuing a postsecondary education. TCCUs like the one at my college have positively impacted Tribal students, but there are still no specific supports for Tribal students in higher education who have experienced foster care. These programs are an important step forward, but the United States still needs to live up to its promises to support and invest in Tribal youth, especially young people whom the government has removed from their families and communities and placed in foster care.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Congress should amend the Higher Education Act to provide funding to allow TCCUs to establish a program to serve Tribal students who have experienced foster care achieve their higher education goals, including but not limited to the following activities:

- **Provide activities to strengthen students' connections** to their tribal culture, identity, and community;
- **Connect program participants with other students who have experienced foster care** in order to facilitate peer support and resource sharing;
- **Connect students to services, supports and opportunities that will help them attain their higher education, post-graduation and employment goals**, including tutoring, support programs, internships, scholarships, and other academic and employment supports;
- **Provide professional development for TCCU staff** to understand the experiences of Tribal youth in foster care and better serve their needs; and
- **Provide other services and supports designed to improve the educational experiences and improve the tribal and cultural connection of Tribal foster youth.**
EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY ACCESS AND SUPPORT FOR ALL YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Cortez Carey

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Congress should authorize a new grant program under the Higher Education Act (HEA) to provide all foster children with computers, wi-fi access, internet hotspots, online tutors, and the other necessary technology supports to ensure them equitable virtual learning opportunities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As one of the most important keys to success for foster youth, education equals opportunity and provides young people with the opportunity to break intergenerational cycles and realize their potential. Because of COVID-19, many youth in foster care suddenly lost their only access to education when schools and postsecondary institutions moved exclusively to online learning because they did not have the appropriate technology or internet connectivity to participate. The U.S. education system was not prepared to accommodate equitable access to education during a public health crisis like COVID-19, and this lack of emergency preparedness left thousands of foster youth sidelined and continues to threaten their futures. To make online learning opportunities accessible for all, Congress should ensure that all foster youth are provided with access to adequate technology resources, during the pandemic and beyond.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

When I was in foster care, school was always the highlight of my day. I was fed two meals, my teachers cared about me, and I felt normal because none of my peers knew what went on at home. School gave me the opportunity to thrive, express myself, and interact with extraordinary mentors who taught me about leadership and accountability. I received a laptop after high school graduation which made it possible for me to continue with my undergraduate degree. My community and school became my safety net in which I learned important critical life skills. Because of COVID-19, many foster youth will not be able to receive the same educational supports that I do simply because they do not have access to basic technology.
### THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Even before COVID-19, numerous studies have shown children and youth in foster care often experience worse educational outcomes than their peers who live in permanent family settings. Only 5% of rural foster youth and 21% of urban foster youth have consistent access to a computer in their homes, making them one of the most technologically underserved populations in the world (iFoster: How Technology, n.d.). In addition, foster youth face academic difficulties due to less developed cognitive skills, lower academic achievement, and inferior classroom performance compared to children who have not experienced abuse and neglect (Altshuler, 1997, pp. 121-128). Historically, this is due to school instability, lack of emphasis on education at home, and lack of access to critical educational resources, including access to technology. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause massive educational instability and stunted learning for many foster youth who do not have the necessary technology to adapt to virtual learning environments. Foster youth need technology resources to stay connected with their school and on-track with academic curricula not only during the current crises, but as more and more schools make virtual learning part of their everyday requirements.

During the pandemic, Congress authorized the CARES Act, which provided significant funding to the U.S Department of Education to be used for education stabilization, some of which is being used to support technological capacity and access for schools and universities, including hardware and software, connectivity, and instructional expertise to support remote learning through four new grant programs (Funding Digital Learning, n.d.). While these programs will help some schools and colleges help to bridge the digital divide during the pandemic, not all youth in foster care will be able to access the technology they need under these programs. In addition, these grants will not provide youth in foster care with access to technology supports beyond the pandemic, particularly as more and more educational opportunities move online.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATION

To ensure all foster youth are able to access the technology and online academic supports they need to learn and succeed during national emergencies and beyond:

- **Congress should establish a new grant program available to any agency, school, or university that serves young people in foster care or transitioning out of foster care to pay for a range of technology supports that are based on each young person’s unique needs.** In combination with existing resources made available through the CARES Act, child welfare agencies, and other private technology non-profits, this program will go a long way in helping create equitable virtual learning opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the future.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 is affecting the lives of everyday Americans, but it is having a particularly severe impact on the nation’s foster care community. The stress and uncertainty of the pandemic has heightened the challenges already facing youth in and transitioning from foster care, such as housing instability, lack of educational resources, and financial insecurity. While young people aged 18-21 already receive some assistance from child welfare agencies and other sources in many states, pandemic-related expenses have made it difficult to cover certain essential needs. In addition, many young adults transitioning from foster care are not eligible for the same stimulus money and other emergencies funding available to other Americans. A new trust fund for youth in foster care would help ensure financial stability for young people who are transitioning out of foster care and into adulthood on their own.

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

To ensure financial security at one of the most uncertain times in their lives, Congress should establish the Hope Fund, a new federal program that would mandate all states with extended foster care to create and contribute to a trust fund for every eligible young adult in foster care ages 18-21. Authorized under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, the Hope Fund would be financed through a federal-state partnership, with 50% of the funds ($500) deposited into the fund by the state and 50% ($500) deposited by the federal government every month an eligible young person is in foster care.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Like many students, college is a place where I have a found community, support network, and home. All of this was upended by COVID-19. As a rising junior at Old Dominion University, I shared my classmates’ deep disappointment over having to leave campus and switch to online learning. But as a young person who has spent the past five years in the foster care system, I am experiencing off-campus life very differently from most of my peers. When our campus closed, I lost my housing and primary source of income through my on-campus job because my work-study program was not considered essential. On top of that uncertainty, I was unable to qualify for a stimulus check to help cover the unexpected costs of moving and other basic needs. Unfortunately, my experience is not unique.
The COVID-19 impact on the financial health of young adults in foster care:

- **65%** were laid off from work.
- **52%** did not receive a stimulus check.


**THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW**

Every year, youth in foster care benefit from a plethora of programs that contribute to their success in school, home life, and beyond. One of these important support programs is the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019). Authorized under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act the Chafee program provides funds to states, territories, and tribal entities to provide current and former foster youth with access to educational assistance, career exploration, mentoring, and preventive health activities among other services. While the Chafee program has been a great source of support to many young adults in the child welfare system, it does not help address many of the current financial struggles that youth are facing due to COVID-19. In recent years, there has been extensive discussion in the child welfare field about establishing individual trust funds as a way to ensure financial security for young people in foster care. In June 2002, the Children’s Bureau issued guidance clarifying that states could use Chafee Program funding to establish trust funds for young people in foster care, but it does not require them to do so (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Another standing issue with the Chafee program is that it provides funding to the states instead of putting the funds directly in the hands of youth.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

To enable young adults transitioning from foster care to meet unexpected expenses during times of financial crisis, Congress should require the use of funding under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to:

- **Establish the Hope Fund, a new government trust fund for young adults in extended foster care**, by authorizing a federal-state partnership with 50% of the funds ($500) deposited into the fund by the state and 50% ($500) deposited by the federal government every month an eligible young person is in extended foster care;
- **Under the new program, eligible foster youth would be permitted to use up to $500 per month in the trust account to cover unexpected expenses** while in care and draw the remaining funds tax-free to ensure a financial cushion upon leaving foster care; and
- **Require all states with extended foster care to create Hope Fund accounts for every eligible young adult in foster care ages 18-21.**
INCREASING ACCESS TO KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAM FUNDING FOR INFORMAL KINSHIP PROVIDERS

Autumn Adams

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

The Children’s Bureau should create a pilot program to test different types of evidence-based standards that may be more appropriate to evaluate the effectiveness of kinship navigator programs (KNPs). Congress should require that KNPs receiving federal funds under the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) are serving informal caregivers too, rather than only families formally involved in the child welfare system.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About 2.7 million children are being raised by grandparents, other family members, or close family friends in the United States (Generations United, 2020). These relatives provide a safe haven for children and are often the safety net preventing children from entering foster care. However, relative caregivers need more support to help raise children in their care. Kinship navigator programs (KNPs) must be expanded to reach more relatives, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, as families struggle with various challenges. The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) allows for federal reimbursement to KNPs; however, no KNPs have qualified for federal reimbursement because they are unable to meet certain evidence-based standards.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Growing up, the only thing I wanted was to have a home – someplace where I knew I was safe no matter what happened. My grandmother gave me that space. Now, I provide that same feeling of home for my siblings. The process of winning guardianship of my brother and sister allowed me to understand all of the struggles, sacrifices, and difficult choices my grandmother went through to raise me. My grandmother never received any support while raising six of her grandkids on a limited income. Now, I am raising my brother (16) and sister (11) with no support. This led to working two jobs while attending college full-time and living paycheck to paycheck. There needs to be support for informal kinship providers, like me and my grandmother, who with a lot of love and sacrifice, are preventing unnecessary trauma by keeping kids with family.
**THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW**

The COVID-19 pandemic is creating a multitude of new challenges for caregivers, including job insecurity, housing insecurity, food insecurity, canceled childcare arrangements, difficulties managing home schooling, and others. Federal child welfare law is designed to support “formal” licensed kinship providers, but provides little to no support for “informal” kinship providers taking care of relatives without having a case officially opened by a child welfare agency. This inequity creates significant financial hardship for informal kinship caregivers, which can negatively affect the safety and stability of children in their care. Many informal kinship providers are older (grandparents) and living on a fixed income or younger like me, just starting off with limited financial security.

Kinship navigator programs (KNPs) are designed to provide information and assistance to kinship caregivers and are particularly helpful to unlicensed informal caregivers. Under FFPSA, federal reimbursement is now available for KNPs that meet certain evidence-based standards. However, the standards in FFPSA are not conducive for evaluating the effectiveness of KNPs, which has resulted in no programs currently qualifying for federal reimbursement. Different evidence-based standards that better capture the effectiveness of these programs need to be identified. Furthermore, KNPs have the option to only serve kinship families formally involved in the child welfare system. This option is problematic because more children are being raised by kin informally, outside of the formal child welfare system, and these informal caregivers need more support, like those provided by KNPs, because they do not have access to the types of services and programs that families within the system do.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- **The Children’s Bureau should create a pilot program to test different types of evidence-based standards that may be more appropriate to evaluate the effectiveness of kinship navigator programs (KNPs).** This is important during COVID-19 as more relatives are struggling to support the children in their care and more KNPs are needed to connect these families to additional support and resources. Identifying more appropriate evidence-based standards will ensure that stronger kinship navigator program models are expanded and provide better support to relative caregivers.

- **Congress should require that kinship navigator programs (KNPs) receiving federal funding under FFPSA are also serving informal caregivers.** In light of the current pandemic, informal kinship providers are facing increased insecurity with less services and support than those formally involved in the child welfare system. Access to the help provided by KNPs is critical to supporting caregivers during challenging times.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Technology has become a lifeline during the COVID-19 pandemic and essential for connections to school, work, loved ones, and support systems. For children and families who do not have digital access, the pandemic has caused extreme isolation, which, combined with financial stress and uncertainty, is likely to lead to an increase in child abuse and neglect. For children and families already involved in the child welfare system, a lack of digital access means they are cut off from virtual support services. Children and youth deserve to feel safe during these unprecedented times, and families who need services should be able to receive them.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

My biological family did not have a phone, computer, or internet access at home, and in order to do my schoolwork and connect with support systems, I relied heavily on the public library. When I felt unsafe at home, I had to run to my neighbor’s house to ask for help or call the police. As a result of COVID-19, states have at times instituted shelter-in-place orders, leaving many children, like me, isolated at home in potentially dangerous situations. Isolation leaves children beyond the watchful eyes of teachers, coaches, doctors, therapists, and extended family, making it harder for others to intervene and offer help. A lack of access to technology means that many young people and their families lack needed connections to the outside world that could support them during tumultuous times.

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Congress should allow Title IV-B funds to be used to provide internet and other technology to vulnerable youth and families involved in the child welfare system. Congress should also authorize a monthly reimbursement to low income families up to $100 to support the purchase of broadband and other devices such as a phone, laptop, or tablet.

THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Research is clear that increased stress and financial insecurity can increase child maltreatment, and the COVID-19 pandemic is creating both (Griffith, 2020, pp. 1–7). American families without technology and digital access are unable to receive necessary services to support families and keep children safe. According to BroadbandNow Research, an estimated 42 million Americans – 13% of the population – do not have access to the internet (Busby & Tanberk, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has only widened this divide, especially as social distancing requirements have made technology essential for every part of life. According to iFoster, in 2019 “only 5% of rural foster youth and 21% of urban foster youth report access to a computer at home” (iFoster: 6 Quick, n.d.). The Children’s Bureau has released guidance stating that Title IV-B may be used to purchase phones for older youth during the pandemic (Milner, 2020). However, additional technology support is essential for not only foster youth, but for all vulnerable children and families, including those outside of the child welfare system who are under increased stress and need better access to support services.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To help close the digital divide and keep children safe, Congress should:

- **Allow Title IV-B to be used to provide internet and other technology** to vulnerable youth and families involved in the child welfare system.
- **Provide a monthly reimbursement to low income families** up to $100 to support the purchase of broadband and other devices such as a phone, laptop, or tablet.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the country, grandparents and other relatives have stepped forward to care for children inside and outside of the foster care system. Congress currently allocates funding for kinship navigator programs to provide information and referrals for these families, but not all states are aware they can also use these program dollars to pay for critical goods and supplies. Congress should amend the current language in Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to make it clear that federal kinship navigator program funding can be used to support direct relief for kinship families during the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises. More precise language on the ways this funding can be used would be beneficial, especially as for older caregivers, who may need additional assistance during national emergencies. Clarifying program flexibility will help more kinship families meet their basic needs and maintain a stable home for children in their care.

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Congress should amend Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to make it clear that states can use federally-allocated funding under Kinship Navigator Programs to purchase critical goods and supplies to help caregivers meet basic needs and maintain family stability during the COVID-19 pandemic and other times of crisis.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

During my time in foster care, I was raised by my grandparents. While they always tried to make my life as “normal” as possible, there were difficulties. My grandfather has ongoing heart problems which made certain tasks difficult, such as driving and running errands. My grandparents often lacked the necessary tools to help me succeed. Having a source of funding for being kinship caregivers would have been an enormous help to my grandparents. Foster care funds, Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Family Caregiver Support Programs are important existing sources of funding for families, but they do not always pay for important services such as transportation, technology for distance learning, and grocery delivery. Clarifying that kinship navigator funds can be used for direct services and supplies would allow family members to better understand the types of help available to provide for their children. Also, understanding the allowances and boundaries of this program would decrease the risk of young people reentering the foster care system due to insufficient financial support.
THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Federal law defines kinship navigator programs as “services that assist kinship caregivers in learning about and accessing programs and resources to meet the needs of children they are raising, to provide help for the family as a whole to safeguard stability, and to promote partnerships among public and private agencies” (Casey Family, 2018). However, despite this broad statutory language, many states believe kinship navigator programs are only intended to improve caregivers’ knowledge of services and assist them in being able to identify and access the services they need, not to cover the costs of the services themselves (Children’s Bureau, 2015). Given this common misinterpretation, more precise language on how kinship navigator funding can be used is needed to ensure that all states understand they can use these IV-E dollars to pay for direct goods and services and other immediate needs presented by COVID-19 and in other times of crisis. This flexibility is especially important for older caregivers who are at the greatest risk of serious illness and death from the novel coronavirus. If older caregivers or caregivers with compromised immune systems develop the virus, the children in their care are at a heightened risk of returning to state custody. Currently, kinship caregivers who keep young people out of foster care save taxpayers roughly $4 billion per year (Generations United, 2014). Without adequate resources to maintain a healthy environment for their children, the number of young people entering the foster care system will spike during COVID-19 and in other national emergencies.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

In order to better support kinship caregivers, Congress should:

- Amend the current language in Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to clarify states can use federally-allocated funding under kinship navigator programs to purchase critical supplies to help caregivers meet basic needs during COVID-19 and other times of crisis. Clarifying the current statutory language will encourage all states to use this federal funding more flexibly to help families meet their basic needs, cover unexpected expenses, and ensure that young people are able to stay safely with grandparents or other family members instead of going back into the foster care system, having to move to officially enter foster care, or move to a different placement within the foster care system.
KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER THROUGH TECHNOLOGY AND VIRTUAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Alan Abutin

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Congress should provide an enhanced 75% funding match under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to encourage states to provide foster and adoptive families with wireless internet access, cell phones, laptops, and the other technologies they need to access mental health services and other important child welfare services remotely.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has been increasingly difficult on the mental and emotional health of children, youth, and families involved with the foster care system, a community that has already experienced elevated levels of anxiety and trauma. As a result of stay-at-home orders and social distancing requirements, most child welfare services and supports are being delivered through online platforms, including therapy and other mental health services. Unfortunately, many foster and adoptive families do not have access to internet or laptops with video capabilities, inhibiting their connection to mental health professionals and therapists. To ensure foster youth are getting the mental health support they need, the government has a responsibility to provide low-income foster and adoptive families with affordable technological resources, such as wireless internet access, cell phones, laptops, and other necessary technology tools.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Before being adopted at age five, I spent three years in foster care because of my parents’ substance dependence. The trauma I endured through these experiences continue to present mental and emotional obstacles. Growing up, I struggled to connect with my adoptive family due to our ethnic and cultural differences. These gaps often resulted in confrontations that hindered me from creating a strong bond with them. It was not until I started utilizing counseling services that I was able to increase my emotional intelligence and learn how to build more meaningful family relationships. Although I was adopted by a family who could provide me with support during COVID-19, many low-income foster families are unable to afford basic technology and internet access. As a result, they cannot access critical virtual mental health services during this global crisis when they are most essential. Equitable, high-quality mental health services have been important to me, and providing others with the technology to access these services will help alleviate stress and help youth and families heal from trauma.
THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

COVID-19 has exposed many existing problems in the child welfare system, including a lack of funding for technology resources. Some child welfare agencies have found other federal, state, and local funding sources to pay for the technology support for youth and families involved in the child welfare system, but many still lack basic access to computers, internet, and other services. This challenge has been particularly difficult during the COVID-19 when virtual platforms have provided a lifeline for so many through mental health treatment and other services. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Children’s Bureau issued guidance under the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance (Stafford) Act of 1988, a law that allows federal agencies to waive conditions of federal assistance programs in national emergencies. Among other modifications, the Children's Bureau made it clear that states could purchase and operate cell phones using funds under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood under certain circumstances. Unfortunately, the Children’s Bureau did not include other critical sources of technology in this guidance, such as laptops and tablets, wireless internet, and hot spots (Milner, 2020). Foster and adoptive families deserve access to basic technology to help connect them to mental health and other basic services not only during national emergencies, but all the time.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To encourage state child welfare agencies to increase technology access for foster and adoptive families, the federal government should:

- **Allow states to use Title IV-E foster care funding under the Social Security Act to help pay for technologies** that connect youth and families to mental health and other essential child welfare services.
- **Provide an enhanced Title IV-E match to encourage states to purchase these technologies.** In order to use federal IV-E funding, states must match a certain percentage of funding based on different formulas. Congress should offer an enhanced Title IV-E match of 75% to state child welfare agencies to encourage them to buy needed laptops, internet access, and connective technology for foster and adoptive families to access mental health and other services.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has heavily impacted children in foster care, which makes this a crucial time to invest in creating a stronger child welfare workforce that can uplift services during this desperate time. Since the pandemic's long-term effects on the child welfare system are largely unknown, it is essential we increase funding streams that prioritize training and release national guidance that is responsive to the workforce’s need for training and support.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Throughout my nine years in foster care, my needs often fell to the sidelines due to high caseworker turnover rates, high caseloads, and a lack of engagement with my social workers. What I recognize now as burnout among my caseworkers, at the time felt like a lack of interest in my success. After completing a bachelor’s degree in social work, I felt ill-equipped to work with foster youth. I was told I would learn the necessary skills on the job – but my own experience in foster care proved otherwise. The lives of foster youth should never be treated as experiments when each negative experience adds additional trauma and increases barriers to success. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I have heard stories from foster youth about how gaps in the system have only intensified, leaving them more anxious and uncertain. With the circumstances changing daily, the need for skilled professionals trained in authentic youth engagement is critical for positive youth development. Now more than ever, social workers on the frontlines need more tools to effectively work with and support foster youth, to help the youth themselves, and reduce caseworker burnout and turnover.
THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Research has shown, even prior to the pandemic, child welfare professionals report a higher burnout rate than any other helping profession in the country (Leake et al., 2017). In addition, child welfare agencies across the United States have seen an increased rate of child abuse and neglect following natural and economic disasters (Self-Brown et al., 2013, pp. 402–408). With the outcomes of the COVID-19 crisis still unknown, experts believe that the child welfare system should begin preparing for significant caseload increases. Although the Children’s Bureau has released guidance addressing the public health concerns associated with the pandemic, there has yet to be any guidance issued to address the needs of social workers as frontline workers. Training is a critical component of building a resilient workforce and should be built into social work daily practices (UNICEF, 2020). There are two federal funding streams states can use to support training and professional development of their child welfare workforce: Title IV-B and Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, neither of which have seen any increase in funding for training to date.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

In preparation for a surge in child welfare caseloads as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to support social workers. The Administration and Congress can support the child welfare workforce by implementing the following recommendations:

- **The Children's Bureau should disseminate guidance to state child welfare agencies to build resilience in their workforce during the public health emergency.** Agencies should be encouraged to continue training for their staff to address workforce resilience, understand the needs of vulnerable youth and families, and utilize healing-centered engagement methods.

- **Direct federal child welfare dollars to support caseworkers by:**
  - Increasing Title IV-B administrative dollars to promote social worker retention and training during the COVID-19 crisis.
  - Increasing the reimbursement rate for Title IV-E training and administration to direct more federal dollars to specific COVID-19 response training and administrative activities.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, child welfare agencies have begun doing many more home visits virtually. While this change is important for keeping children, families, and the child welfare workforce from spreading the virus, it puts children at an increased risk for abuse in their biological and foster homes.

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

Congress should provide funding through the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) to help state child welfare systems prepare disaster preparedness plans, plan for future disaster situations like COVID-19, and ensure the safety of children and youth under all circumstances.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

I was not always safe when I was in foster care. Even with in-person home visits performed by caseworkers, I was abused in my foster care placements. My personal experiences lead me to strongly believe that removing requirements for in-person contact without proper resources and training will further contribute to instances of child maltreatment. Conducting home visits virtually makes it more challenging for caseworkers to enforce caretaker accountability. Congress should do everything possible to protect children from experiencing the abuse that I did.

In 2013*, an estimated 6.4 MILLION CHILDREN were referred for reports of child abuse and neglect and approximately 2 MILLION of those reports were screened-in for investigation or assessment.

* NOTE: 2013 is the most recent year for which data are available. 
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5408954/
THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Children’s Bureau has allowed monthly home visits to take place virtually to protect the health of families and child welfare workers (Milner, 2020). However, assessing the severity of a child’s situation virtually can increase the likelihood of potentially serious errors (Welch & Haskins, 2020), considering home visits are the “primary way the states monitor the safety of children” (Lowry & Kelly, 2020). Signs of abuse and neglect may be less obvious to caseworkers, presenting a unique risk to child safety and well-being; for example, an abuser could be just off-screen (Hager, 2020). At the same time, the pandemic is elevating the risk of child abuse and neglect, which often worsens during times of isolation and stress (Shanahan et al., 2013). In addition, not all families possess the technology to participate in virtual visits (Dellor et al., 2015, pp. 330–344). These factors put many more children at risk.

The COVID-19 pandemic will likely not be the only crisis requiring virtual home visits in the future. Other disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires, or even a prolonged pandemic may necessitate virtual home visits. It is important to recognize the utility of this platform while being vigilant about the safety of children and youth.

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), a grant program that supports a range of child protection efforts in states (Children’s Bureau, 2019), is an ideal funding stream to support states in preparing disaster preparedness plans to help them respond to both the duration of the COVID-19 crisis and future disasters.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

To help state child welfare systems prepare disaster preparedness plans and ensure the safety of children and youth under all circumstances, Congress should:

- **Provide additional funding through CAPTA to support states in the creation and implementation of disaster preparedness plans for their child welfare workforce.** Funding should be given to provide technological resources to the child welfare workforce and families, research into best practices during the emergency, and to ensure that social workers are given adequate training that addresses the effects of such disasters on families. These plans should also set strict guidelines detailing when virtual visits are appropriate, to ensure child protective services remain as effective as possible.
THE IMPORTANCE OF CASEWORKER AND FOSTER YOUTH VIRTUAL CONNECTIONS IN COVID-19

Ian Marx

RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

To ensure that foster youth get the support they need from their caseworkers, Congress should increase funding to Title IV-B and direct some of that funding to support the purchase of technology, including cell phones, laptops, tablets, and internet access for children and families in the child welfare system.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The pandemic has drastically increased the need for caseworkers to monitor foster youth and families’ environment through virtual visitations; however, nearly 49% of youth in foster care lack the technology to support virtual visitations (Freeman, 2020.) Congress should increase Title IV-B funding and direct some of that funding to ensure that children and families in child welfare have access to technology to maintain connections to their caseworkers and other support services. Though Congress allocated funding to Title IV-B through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, states still lack the capacity to accept foster-youth technological funding requests.

WASHINGTON STATE YOUTH IN NEED OF IMMEDIATE RESOURCES:

- Distance learning access & enrichment activities were the top two survey responses followed by cell phones and food support.
- Foster youth in need: 49%
- Foster youth NOT in need: 51%


PERSONAL REFLECTION

When I was in foster care, I heavily depended on my caseworker for basic assistance. This included taking me to therapy, checking in on my environment, and other necessary tasks that made me feel secure. These visits were vital because the relationship with my caseworker gave me the tools that I needed to handle the trauma of being in the system.
THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Prior to the pandemic, foster youth received support and access to in-person services and connections from a variety of adults, including their caseworkers, teachers, and doctors. Since the pandemic has effectively closed these institutions that youth commonly interact with, foster youth are now even more reliant on their caseworkers for support and stability. While the flexibility to conduct virtual meetings has helped caseworkers maintain caseworker relationships, youth without technology access cannot maintain these connections. A survey conducted by the Treehouse Foundation noted that 49% of foster youth in Washington lack the necessary resources during the pandemic, including laptops and cellphones. Inability to communicate due to this gap in access to technology limits caseworkers’ ability to evaluate the child’s safety and create meaningful connections with youth. Caseworkers need to operate at their full capacity to assist children and families, but that is not possible with the current limit on technology resources.

Title IV-B includes funding to support the purchase of technology, including cell phones, laptops, tablets, and broadband access in order to facilitate communication between families, caseworkers, and courts. One example of a program that has increased access to technology for foster youth is the Determined, Responsible, and Empowered Adolescents Mentoring Relationships (DREAMR) program, which gave foster youth funded cellphones with data plans. Sponsored by the Children’s Bureau, the Clark County Department of Children Services (Las Vegas, NV) administered the program and provided training (Alford et al., 2019, pp. 209-230). This program had positive results and increased contact between foster youth and their caseworkers (Denby et al., 2015, July).

During the pandemic, Ohio has attempted to bridge the technology gap by providing funding to children and youth who do not have internet access to support purchase tablets, web cameras, and wireless hotspots (Jarvis, 2020). This grant helps youth to reach doctors, therapists, and other services during COVID-19’s virtual transition. No outcome data is available yet.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Though Congress allocated funding to Title IV-B through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, states still lack sufficient funds to adequately respond to agency requests for foster-youth technological funding. To ensure that foster youth get the support they need from their caseworkers, Congress should:

- **Increase funding to Title IV-B and direct some of that funding to support the purchase of technology**, including cell phones, laptops, tablets, and internet access for children and families in the child welfare system.
MEET THE AUTHORS

TASHIA ROBERSON-WING (OH/IN)
TASHIA ROBERSON-WING is currently in the Master of Social Work Program at The Ohio State University and received her Bachelor of Science Degree in Applied Health Science from Indiana University. Tashia formerly served as a Project Coordinator for the Center for Native Child and Family Resilience and the Child Welfare Review Project at JBS International Inc. Tashia interned for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s Emerging Leaders Program where she served in the office of U.S. Congressman Todd Rokita. She also interned with U.S. Congressmember Karen Bass. Tashia is a dedicated advocate for foster youth and part of the Nation Youth in Transition Database Review Team. She has volunteered with organizations such as FosterClub and Casey Family Programs to push policy that benefits the foster care community.

JUNELY MERWIN (CA)
JUNELY MERWIN was born and raised in Los Angeles, California where she entered the foster care system at the age of fifteen with her one-month old child in her arms and remained in care until she aged out. Upon exiting foster care, Junely earned a full-ride scholarship at California State University Fullerton and received a bachelor’s degree in Human Services with a concentration in Mental Health and Community Practice. Junely is passionate about community engagement and social justice. She devoted herself to advocacy work to bring foster care awareness and created her website, www.merwinjayact.com, to reach a broader audience and connect foster youth with resources. She has advocated on behalf of numerous legislation and works for a foster youth program in higher education. She uses her life story to inspire change and help disadvantaged youth go after their goals and dreams. Junely aspires to become a nationally known public speaker.

SHANELL LAVALLIE (MT)
SHANELL LAVALLIE is from the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation: her tribes are A’Aninin and Nakoda (GrosVentre and Assiniboin). Shanell is a rising senior at Salish Kootenai College pursuing her Bachelor of Science in elementary education. She aspires to pursue her Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership and dreams of being the superintendent of Great Falls Public Schools. Shanell is passionate about the foster care community and has participated in a variety of advocacy opportunities provided for former foster youth, including the Montana Chaffee Youth Advisory Board, FosterClub All-Star internship, and the National Foster Youth Institute’s (NFYI) Shadow Day. Shanell’s policy research focuses on educational supports and improved Indian education for Native foster youth.
CORTEZ CAREY (PA/DC)

CORTEZ CAREY is a resilient pacesetter from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. After attending six different high schools, then graduating from Community College of Allegheny County with an associate’s degree in Liberal Studies, Cortez earned his bachelor’s degree in Strategic Communication from Clarion University of Pennsylvania in 2014. Subsequently, he was hired by Great Lakes Behavioral Research Center to become the first former foster youth to serve as an Educational Liaison at the Department of Human Services. After failing to be accepted into Master of Social Work (MSW) programs in the country, he decided to reinvigorate his resume by enlisting in the United States Air Force. Thereafter, Cortez climbed the enlisted ranks and earned another associate’s degree in Hospitality Management from the Community College of the Air Force. Succeeding much sacrifice, Cortez is now an MSW graduate student at Howard University in D.C. and will graduate in spring 2021.

MELVIN ROY (VA)

MELVIN ROY is a Richmond, Virginia native currently studying at Old Dominion University where he majors in Human Services with a minor in Psychology. During his time in college, Melvin has been very involved on and off campus. He has founded an organization called Foster-U which seeks to encourage higher education for foster youth through community service, mentorship, and workshops. He has interned with FosterClub in 2019 when he spent seven weeks traveling the country to impact foster youth across the United States. Melvin also is the president of SPEAKOUT, the youth advisory board for Virginia which aims to improve the lives the state’s foster youth community. Melvin has a long-term goal of furthering his education at George Washington University to one day become a U.S. Senator on Capitol Hill.

AUTUMN ADAMS (WA)

AUTUMN ADAMS (Yakama) is a 2020 graduate from Central Washington University with a B.A. in Anthropology and minor in American Indian Studies and Museum Studies. At nineteen, Autumn was awarded guardianship of her siblings, keeping her family together to pass along cultural heritage and teachings. She participated in the National Foster Youth Institute’s (NFYI) Shadow Day in 2018, where she empowered others through sharing her story. She was selected by the Center for Native American Youth as a 2019 “Champion for Change,” advocating for the Indian Child Welfare Act. Autumn was asked to return to NFYI in 2019, serving as a regional coordinator and mentoring other former foster youth. After graduation, Autumn plans to earn a joint Juris Doctor and Master’s in Public Policy. Long-term, Autumn’s goal is to run for public office as an advocate for Indigenous foster youth.
Seeimg Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic: Creating Change for Vulnerable Children and Families

Meet the Authors Continued

**HAILEY D’ELIA (NJ)**

Hailey D’Elia is a rising senior at Rowan University pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Mathematics and Sociology with a Certificate of Undergraduate Study in Social Justice and Social Change. Hailey has worked as a Youth Ambassador with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) Office of Family Voice speaking to foster parents and case workers about her experience in care and addressing misconceptions of youth in care. She is also a member of Youth Council which works directly with the DCF Commissioner to identify issues within the system and offer possible solutions. Hailey’s advocacy work led her to volunteer with Camp To Belong, a camp that brings together siblings who have been separated through the foster and adoptive system. Hailey’s first-hand experiences and passion for reforming the child welfare system are a driving force behind her plans to pursue a law degree.

**ISABELLE GOODRICH (ME/CO)**

Isabelle Goodrich is a junior at Western Colorado University studying Secondary Education with an emphasis in American History. Isabelle is eager to make the world a kinder place and is a firm believer that there is power in sharing your story. Isabelle has been a Jim Casey Young Fellow since 2015, which has allowed her to explore various routes of advocacy work, most recently as a Pod Leader for the Youth Leadership Initiative. She was also a public speaker at the 2019 Berea Rural College Access & Success Summit addressing the needs of foster youth attending schools in remote locations. She has been involved in various projects with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and was a member of Maine’s Youth Leadership Advisory Team prior to relocating to Colorado. Isabelle is enthusiastic, curious, and is honored to work with others who share a passion for child welfare reform.

**ALAN ABUTIN (CT)**

Alan Abutin is a senior at Central Connecticut State University majoring in Communications and minoring in Social Justice. As a member of the S.U.N. Scholars non-profit, Alan has been working on foster care policy focused on the implementation of multicultural pedagogy in hopes to encourage multicultural adoptions and diminish racial disparities after permanency. Alan began his journey as a foster care advocate under the CCSU CARE Scholars program which focuses on mentorship and inclusivity for students who have experiences foster care and adoption. Alan recently created a S.U.N. Scholars chapter at CCSU to further focus on similar issues regarding child welfare at his university.
Meet the Authors Continued

MAKAYLA JAMES (CA)
MAKAYLA JAMES is dedicated to elevating youth voice, fighting for social justice, and creating change within the foster care system. As a child welfare advocate, she is vocal in creating youth-centered processes that promote stability in all aspects of life for foster youth. In 2018, Makayla received her bachelor’s degree in social work from California State University Chico. In her professional career, she has experience working for Resource Family Agencies, California Department of Social Services, California Youth Connection, and the International Foster Care Alliance. Makayla aspires to continue to build a legislative platform that highlights lived experience in the effort to create a more inclusive system for the next generation of foster youth, living out the motto, “Nothing about us without us.”

LAILA-ROSE HUDSON (OH/AL)
LAILA-ROSE HUDSON is currently pursuing a Juris Doctorate at The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law, where she plans to study legal issues pertinent to the child welfare system. Laila-Rose aged out of foster care in 2015 after a tumultuous experience involving multiple placements and limited stability. However, she went on to graduate Magna Cum Laude in 2018 from the University of Alabama Birmingham with a bachelor’s degree in political science. During her undergraduate career, she had the opportunity to serve as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteer. In addition, she gave presentations to foster youth in the community to provide information about college admissions and the various assistance programs available to them.

IAN MARX (LA/IN)
IAN MARX is a rising senior at the University at Notre Dame. He is a New Orleans Posse Merit Scholar majoring in Political Science and minoring in Public Policy. He participates in Baptist Christian Ministry Club, a disability awareness club, and a ballroom dancing club. He has previously interned twice with the Louisiana Institute for Children in Families and has testified for extending the age of foster care to 21 and increased CASA funding in Louisiana. He has also interned for the New Orleans Civil District Court and the New Orleans City Council President’s office. His future aspirations include attending law school.

To be connected with a Foster Youth Intern, please email CCAI at info@ccainstitute.org.
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