

FOSTER CARE TRANSITIONING EVENT REMARKS BY FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

**The White House
East Room
January 29, 1999**

(First part of speech was cut off. The following remarks are similar to her speech as delivered, but may not be exact. Please do not quote from this section.)

I am delighted to welcome all of you to the White House. I want to say a special word of thanks to Senator Jeffords who has worked tirelessly to give all children safe places to go after school and something in life to say "yes" to.

I also want to thank Secretary Shalala for that introduction and for her extraordinary leadership on behalf of all children, especially those too often forgotten. She reminded us of how far we've come in reforming our child welfare system. And we should all be proud of those accomplishments. But today we are also gathered to talk about an issue that hasn't received the attention it deserves.

We know that we must do better by the nearly 20,000 young people who, every year, are forced to leave foster care and make it on their own. So today, I have come here to announce that the President's budget will help ensure that the end of foster care will no longer mean the end of caring for the young people it serves.

None of this would have been possible without the people in this room.

It wouldn't have been possible without my friend Tipper Gore, whose compassion and commitment have placed a national spotlight on mental illness and homelessness. Again, it wouldn't have been possible without Secretary Shalala and her staff at the Department of Health and Human Services.

It wouldn't have been possible without Terry Harrak, John Gutierrez and the other young people who walked in with Tipper and me just now. The courageous voices they have raised have educated the nation about this issue and inspired us all.

And it wouldn't have been possible without all of you who have been their biggest champions. I especially want to thank the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Child Welfare League of America, and the Casey Family Program for their deep commitment and for helping to pull this event together.

As I look across this room, it is wonderful to see researchers, advocates, and community providers from all over the country. I don't think we've ever been privileged to host at the White House a group of people who have fought harder or longer to lift up the lives of former foster children. And all of us owe you a debt of gratitude for that.

In some ways, my own experiences with this issue started when I was a little girl. I'd ask my mother, as all children do, what it was like for her to grow up. She was never in formal foster care. But she told me about how her teen parents couldn't take care of her after she was born. How they sent her to live with her grandparents. And how, when that didn't work out, she moved in with a family and took care of their children in exchange for room and board.

My mother has often told me how grateful she is to the woman she moved in with. Because she was able to see what a real family is like. She watched what happens inside a home

when children have someone to praise them when they succeed and pick them up when they fall. Someone who cares what happens to them day after day. Someone to simply love them.

Most of us remember looking forward to celebrating our 18th birthdays -- and not just because of the party. It meant we could vote. It meant we could go away to college or get a job. It meant we were becoming adults. But it didn't mean we were on our own.

But, if you ask the young people here -- or others who have aged out of foster care -- many will tell you that their 18th birthday was the start of a very tough road alone. We know young people who age out of foster care are more likely to drop out of school, land in a homeless shelter, be unemployed, come down with health problems, or have trouble getting health care.

And we know that these young people often carry with them traumatic experience of abuse and neglect, experiences of being shuffled from home to home.

More powerful than any statistic, I hope that every single elected official and every single American hears the stories of the young people here today and their peers across the country. Because there are no more powerful advocates or educators.

I hope they hear the voices of the young people here from cities such as Tucson, San Francisco and Alexandria. They carry with them stories of being homeless while trying to finish school. They come here with gratitude for all of those who reached down to lift them up. And now many are helping others to do the same.

Whenever someone wants to know why we must do more for young people aging out of foster care, I hope they'll hear the voices of Alfred Perez -- who is here -- and others active in the California Youth Connection, an extraordinary group of young men and women I had the privilege to visit with just over a year ago in Berkeley.

It was right before Thanksgiving. And, one by one, they described what it was like to leave the foster care system. One 19-year-old confessed that it was her first Thanksgiving by herself -- and she didn't have anyone to call to ask how to bake a turkey. And a young man in college talked about what how it feels when the dorms close down, when other students pack up to go home for the holidays and you have absolutely no where to go.

(The following remarks represent Mrs. Clinton's speech as delivered.)

I hope that everyone who wonders why we need to do more for young people leaving foster care will hear the voices of people like Joy Warren, who is here with us today. Joy is in her first year at Yale Law School, my alma mater. Unlike most of the other students there, she spent her childhood in foster care, and she has been entirely on her own since age 18. For seven years, she has lived without the support that permanent families provide...and all the while, she managed to receive a college degree, work as an advocate to improve foster care, and begin law school.

I met Joy in September at a conference called Destination Future, in which current and former foster children and homeless youth came together to talk about and learn about life skills and what they could do to help others overcome the obstacles they face every day. I've just received the report from the Conference, and it contains important messages for all of us. We need more awareness about this issue. Young people aging out of foster care need medical insurance. They need training and education. And that can only happen if we make greater investments in their lives.

Now, we know that there are countless people working in states, counties, and communities to meet those challenges -- many in this room are working to do just that.

There are programs in Texas and Florida, for example, that provide college tuition to state schools for young people in foster care who are accepted. In Los Angeles County, entry-level jobs are set aside for young people aging out of the foster care system. And like other Independent Living Programs, New York's is helping young people aging out of foster care with school, jobs, housing and the other tools that they need. One of those young people, Analeah Charles, is here with us today.

We should take these success stories and make sure they are replicated throughout our country. That's why I am so pleased to announce that the President's budget over the next five years will include \$280 million to help former foster children make the transition to independence -- and make the most of their lives.

We will be increasing funding for the Independent Living Program by 50 percent -- and giving foster children more help finishing high school, getting a job, and finding a place to live.

Now in many states and communities, the rule about aging out of foster care is whether you turn 18 or graduate from high school -- whichever happens first. So there are many children who are out of foster care even though they have not yet finished high school.

We will also be offering \$50 million in new competitive grants so that the states can continue to provide economic support to former foster children living through their transition.

We want to help more community-based programs that are giving homeless youth places to live and skills to build their futures. And I am pleased to announce that we are increasing funding for the Transitional Living Program by 33 percent.

And finally, the President's budget says that young people who age out of foster care should be eligible for Medicaid until they are 21. For too many young people, foster care means insurance -- and when they leave, they lose their Medicaid coverage.

In this country, I believe no person should be in the ranks of the uninsured -- but I certainly think no young person should be uninsured.

Now when we do all of this -- which I hope we certainly will in a bipartisan way, bringing new leaders of both political parties and our Congress together, and with the support of all of you throughout our nation who are advocates and workers in the field of foster care -- we will have a lot to celebrate. But the main reason I believe we will achieve what I hope we can with the President's leadership will be because of the courageous young people who are with us today who represent thousands and thousands of other young people across our country.

It will be because of young people such as Terry Harrak. When she turned 18, she was a senior in high school. But she soon found herself without foster care, without a job, without a place to call home. Night after night, she slept over at teachers' and friends' homes, she slept in metro terminals, she slept in hospital emergency rooms. Day after day, she would wake up and continue going to school. And she graduated.

Now I think that the story Terry has to tell us should be heard by everyone. She is now a participant in the Living Independently for Tomorrow Program in Alexandria, Virginia. She has a place to live, a job and community college to attend, and people to guide and support her. She is here with us today. It is my great honor to introduce Terry Harrak.

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the First Lady

For Immediate Release

January 29, 1999

FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
ANNOUNCES NEW EFFORTS TO SUPPORT TRANSITIONING FOSTER CARE YOUTH

January 29, 1999

Today at the White House, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, accompanied by Mrs. Tipper Gore and Secretary Donna Shalala, announces that the President's FY 2000 budget will include \$280 million over five years in new support for young people who leave our nation's public foster care system at age 18 without an adoptive family or other permanent relationship.

Foster Care Youth Reaching Adulthood Face Tough Challenges. Nearly 20,000 young people leave foster care each year having reached the age of 18 without an adoptive family or other permanent relationship. Today, federal financial support for these young people ends just as they are making the critical transition to independence. Without the emotional, social and financial support that families provide, many of these youth are not adequately prepared for life on their own. Studies show that within two to four years of leaving foster care, only half have completed high school, fewer than half are employed, one-fourth have been homeless for at least one night, 30 percent did not have access to needed health care, 60 percent of the young women have given birth, and less than one-in-five are completely self-supporting.

New Support For Youth Leaving Foster Care. The President's FY 2000 budget will include \$280 million over five years to provide a framework for enhanced federal support to these young people:

Increasing the Federal Independent Living Program by 50 Percent. The Independent Living Program, run through the States, assists older foster care children to prepare for independence by helping them to earn a high school diploma, participate in vocational training or education, and learn daily living skills such as budgeting, career planning and securing housing and employment. Since 1992, the program's funding has been frozen at \$70 million. The President's budget will increase the program by 50 percent, investing \$175 million over five years in these services.

Offering Time Limited Economic Support. Young people often transition from foster care with no economic support. The President's budget will include \$50 million over four years to create new competitive grants to States to complement the Independent Living program services by providing time-limited financial support for these young people as they develop the skills and education needed to move into the workforce. Providing Health Insurance. Today, when young people emancipate from foster care, they face numerous health risks, but too often lose their health insurance. The President's budget will propose that these young people remain eligible for Medicaid up to age 21. His budget will include \$50 million over five years for this purpose.

Increasing the Transitional Living Program. The President's budget will include a 33 percent increase in the Transitional Living program, which provides competitive funds to local community-based organizations for residential care, life skills training, and other support services to homeless adolescents, ages 16-21. The program

is currently funded at \$15 million; the President's budget will increase that funding by \$5 million for FY 2000.

CLINTON ADMINISTRATION ACCOMPLISHMENTS
ON FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION
January 29, 1999

Today's announcement builds on a deep commitment by the President, the First Lady, and the Administration to facilitate adoptions and improve the child welfare system. Since taking office, President Clinton has championed efforts to make foster care work better for the children it serves, to find and assist adoptive families, and to break down financial, racial, geographic and bureaucratic barriers to adoption:

- Achieving Landmark Legislative Reform. On November 19, 1997, the President signed the Adoption and Safe Families Act, reforming our nation's child welfare system and making it clear that the health and safety of children must be the paramount concerns of state child welfare services. This landmark legislation was based in large part on the recommendations of the Clinton Administration's Adoption 2002 report, which the President requested by executive memorandum on December 14, 1996, to meet his goals of doubling adoptions and permanent placements by the year 2002 and moving children more quickly from foster care to permanent homes. The Act tightened time frames for making permanent placement decisions for children and ensured health insurance coverage for all special needs children in subsidized adoptions. Also, it created new financial incentives for states to increase adoptions, and continued funding for services to keep families together when it is appropriate and safe.

- Making Adoption Affordable for Families. In 1996, President Clinton signed into law the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996, which provides a \$5,000 tax credit to families adopting children, and a \$6,000 tax credit for families adopting children with special needs. This provision has alleviated a significant barrier to adoption, helping middle class families for whom adoption may be prohibitively expensive and making it easier for families to adopt children with special needs. Since President Clinton took office, the number of children with special needs who were adopted with federal adoption assistance has risen by over 60 percent. In the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, President Clinton ensured more support for families who adopt children with the \$500 per-child tax credit.

- Giving States Flexibility and Support. To test innovative strategies to improve state child welfare systems, the Clinton Administration has granted waivers to 18 states, giving them more flexibility in tailoring services to meet the needs of children and families. In addition, the Administration has provided states with enhanced technical support and helped improve court operations. The President secured \$20 million in FY 1999 in new funds to support state efforts to implement the new adoption law. In addition, through the Adoption Opportunities program, the President has supported state and local innovative demonstration projects to promote adoption, provide post-adoptive services, and build new public-private partnerships. To prevent children from entering foster care in the first place, in 1993 the Clinton Administration enacted and secured federal funding for the Family Preservation and Support Program (renamed in 1997 the Preserving Safe and Stable Families Program) to help states, local governments, and service providers develop effective programs to serve children and families at risk.

- Using the Internet to Promote Adoption. In November, 1998, the President issued a new directive to the Department of Health and Human Services to expand the use of the Internet as a tool to find homes for children waiting to be adopted from foster care. Effective use of the

Internet will help to meet the President's goal of doubling, by the year 2002, adoptions and other permanent placements from the public child welfare system.

- Breaking Down Racial and Ethnic Barriers to Adoption. New inter-ethnic adoption provisions, passed as a part of the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996, ensure that the adoption process is free from discrimination and delays on the basis of race, culture and ethnicity by strengthening the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act which the President signed in 1994.

- Providing Supports for Child Protection and Adoption. In 1993, President Clinton signed into law the Family and Medical Leave Act, enabling parents to take time off to adopt a child without losing their jobs or health insurance. In addition, the welfare reform legislation signed by the President maintained the guarantee of child protection and adoption, and did not reduce funds for child welfare, child abuse, and foster care and adoption services.

**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
VIDEOTAPED REMARKS TO
THE INAUGURAL SYMPOSIUM
DAVE THOMAS CENTER FOR ADOPTION LAW
CAPITAL UNIVERSITY LAW SCHOOL
COLUMBUS, OHIO
FEBRUARY 5, 1999**

Good morning. I wish I could be with you as you begin this important symposium on adoption. Each of you -- whether you have done groundbreaking research, worked to support our court system, or advocated on behalf of children in foster care -- bring an important voice to today's discussion of how to remove barriers to adoption. I'd like to thank the Dave Thomas Center for Adoption Law and Capital University Law School for sponsoring this convening. And, I'd like to salute my friend, Dave Thomas. No one -- no one -- has done more to advance the cause of adoption in America. Your vision, your leadership, your commitment, your drive, and your generous spirit serve as an inspiration to all of us.

Those of us who care about strengthening our nation's foster care system and improving adoptions have much to be proud of. Under my husband's leadership, we passed the Family and Medical Leave Act, which gives time off to parents who adopt a child. We provided a tax credit for families who adopt. We've worked to eliminate discrimination and delays based on race and ethnicity. And just over one year ago, the President signed into law the Adoption and Safe Families Act -- a landmark piece of legislation that was the result of the hard work and dedication of so many of you. That law holds out the promise that we can reduce foster care drift and secure permanent placements for children across our country.

But, of course, realizing the goals of this legislation -- and achieving the President's goal of doubling the number of adoptions by the year 2002 -- will take the sustained commitment not only of federal, state and local governments, but of private partners as well. Together, we must make sure that lawyers and judges and human service workers are recruited and trained to work on cases involving vulnerable children with skill, care, respect, and commitment. And, we must engage all sectors of society -- including employers, lawyers, and concerned citizens -- to do what they can to promote adoption in their communities.

That's why I am so delighted that you are gathered today. I am grateful to all of you for your commitment to adoptable children, to their prospective adoptive parents, and to the important legal issues that will bring them together to form loving families. I wish you a productive and rewarding conference.

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Remarks at Destination Future '98
4-H Club
September 11, 1998

Thank you. Thank you Joy and thank you all for inviting me to be here. I am very happy and delighted to be here with Joy and Erica on the stage, and all of you who are using your experience and energy on behalf of yourselves and other young people in the foster care system and those who have transitioned out of it, looking for ways to use your experience to make all of our systems, and the lives that they affect, better.

I want to thank Carol Williams for her leadership and her stalwart advocacy on behalf of children and youth. I have had the pleasure of working with Carol over a number of years now and many of the changes that we try to make on behalf of a better improved foster care and adoption system are because of her dedication.

I want to thank Jim Walker and all of you who are associated with the National Resource Center for caring about this extraordinarily important group of people in our country. I want to thank Donna Hughes for the National Network which I think is one of the best ways we can keep the issues of foster care, adoption and our systems that affect young people on the front burner.

As Joy mentioned, I was privileged to meet with a group of young people who were active in the California Youth Connection. And I was so impressed. My staff, my friends, my husband and my daughter know that I have talked about that meeting many times since then. I was impressed by the intelligence, the thoughtfulness and honesty of those young people who were still in the foster care system and those who have aged out of it.

And I came away from that meeting even more committed to do whatever I can do to try and make sure that your voices are heard. Because there isn't any doubt in my mind that after having been involved with foster care for more than twenty eight or nine years now, that there are any voices that are more important than yours.

And I have a feeling that this is the right time for those voices to be heard. That the issues that you will discuss this weekend will not just be left here when you go back to your states and communities but they will serve as a blueprint for what else we need to be doing here in Washington and in state capitals with organizations like the Resource Center and in networks around our country.

I thought a lot about why I have been so committed to and concerned about foster care for so many years. And I think it is for a number of reasons. I knew growing up that my mother had not been in formal foster care, but she had found it impossible to remain with her parents who were both teenagers when she was born many years ago. She was sent to live with a set of her grandparents, and that did not work out, so she went to work in the home of a family where she worked for room and board and a place to live, helping to take care of the children of that family. And that is how she got through high school.

When she ended high school, she had nowhere to go, and she didn't feel that she had a family that she could go to. When I was growing up, we often had the help of young women who were on the brink of aging out the foster care system -- not from any foster home with a family, but from what we would now call a group home. So, three or four of these young women would come and work with my mother as she had been worked with when she was a young woman.

My mother has often told me how grateful she is to the woman with whom she lived because she got to see a real family. She got to watch what happens inside a home where parents and children went through all they should go through in a family, because she never had that. And she wanted to give that opportunity to other young women as well.

When I was in law school, I now refer to it as Joy's law school -- Yale Law School -- I began working with legal services in New Haven, Connecticut. And the cases that came my way were cases involving foster children. Difficult cases of trying to decide if children should remain with that child's biological parents, to be put into foster care to be adopted out of foster care or sent to group homes -- all of the issues you have struggled with first hand.

And I saw through the cases that I handled, in the children and adults I represented, how difficult it was to make the decision that was best for the children. And often it wasn't a matter of people being mean spirited or malicious, it was just that they

were very difficult decision.

And so for all of those years since then, I have tried to keep my attention on the fostercare system. But I don't think that any one of us who have worked in it all these years really had the benefit of an organized way of hearing from the people who truly had the most to say about it -- those of you who had seen that system in a very personal way.

I wanted to come today to do several things. To ask you to be as honest and as helpful as you possibly can this weekend and throughout the year. To make sure that every decision-maker in every community, state and at the national level, knows what you know. And we will do what we can to amplify your voices so that your knowledge carries as far as possible.

Secondly, I think it is time for those of you who are on the front-line with this expertise to become our partners in improving and reporting these systems. As Carol Williams said, you have made progress, and I am very grateful for that progress. The administration, particularly the President, has brought to the forefront issues of foster care and adoption that had never been there before.

We have had events in the Oval Office at the White House where foster children, foster parents, social workers and advocates gathered to get the message out to our countries about how many children are in foster care and what your -- what their needs are.

We have passed laws like the Family and Medical Leave Law which encourages and gives time off to parents who adopt a child. We've provided a tax credit and an even higher tax credit to families who adopt children with medical or other problems. We have worked very hard to make foster care and adoption free from discrimination based on race, culture and ethnicity.

And last year, there was a historic step taken on behalf of foster care and adoption when, after a lot of hard work by many people, the President signed the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. That Act is aimed at improving the foster care and adoption system and particularly improving the decision-making process, so that a decision can be made in a more orderly, effective and a timely manner, as to whether a child can return home, whether a child should be and can be placed for

adoption and then be placed as quickly as possible to create permanent solutions.

When the President signed that bill he said that we have laid the building blocks of what children should have as their basic fundamental rights -- a decent safe home, an honorable, orderly, positive upbringing -- a chance to live out their dreams and their God-given capacities.

So there has been progress. But I am not here to tell you that we have made anywhere near the progress we need to or we have to. Certainly what was done in the bill that was signed last year will help us move toward our national goal of doubling our national adoption rate. We want the laws to be friendly to people who are in the process of adopting, and we have put into place some safeguards and changes that we hope will make that possible.

For example, the bill shortens the time that a state has to place kids in permanent homes. It strengthens supports to help keep families together when that is possible, and when it is not, to make the decision to move on.

Most importantly, the legislation makes the health and safety of children the first priority. There are over 100,000 young children in our foster care system. That is way too many. We have to be more creative and more determined to do whatever we can to bring those numbers down, because we know there are many unmet needs of those children who are in our fostercare system. But one of those needs that has not gotten the attention it deserves is what happens when you age out the system. And that is what I heard a lot about when I met with the group of young people in California last year.

About 65,000 young people like yourselves will age out the system in the next three years. What can we do better to help you to help them? I heard a lot of advice last year and we are attempting to act on that. We want to address the important needs that young people face when their eighteenth birthday arrives.

That is why I am pleased today to announce a series of grants -- more than \$1 million devoted to making state and local programs that serve young people to work better for the young people they serve. These grants from the Department of Health and Human Services are aimed at giving nine states more assistance in strengthening how they deal with young people.

We want to do a better job in independent living. We want to do a better job in making sure you have the services you need as you transition out and afterward.

We know very well, and I have heard from numbers of young people who are on the brink or who have already aged out of the system, that you face extraordinary challenges.

Many foster youth face homelessness or difficulty finishing high school or enrolling in college or finding a job. And great difficulty in meeting health care needs, which means that you have nowhere to turn and will be uninsured, and are not getting those skills you require to live independently.

Now we know there are programs around the country that are working, and we want to hear honestly from you what works and what doesn't work. I learned for example, that because of advocacy of foster youth around our country programs in Texas and Florida promote college tuition assistance to young people in foster care. In Los Angeles County, set-aside entry level jobs are available for those who are aging out of foster care. Massachusetts has a teen parent transitional living program to help young mothers who are aging out of foster care with parenting and transitional living assistance.

And the California Youth Connection is becoming a national model of how to bring young teens and older young people together to form a network of support and advocacy. We are finally seeing some movement on behalf of older foster youth and those that have transitioned out. So this is a perfect time for you to be meeting to give us advice and to organize yourselves so that you can be sure to have an impact on the policies that are set.

We must strengthen the Federal Independent Living Program which provides 85,000 young people with critical help on their transition to independence. It helps young people like yourselves get a high school diploma and access to vocational training. It helps you learn the daily living skills that we all need like budgeting and finding a place to live.

But we have to review this program and evaluate its effectiveness and we need your help. Now some adults have a hard time admitting that being an adult doesn't mean that we have all the answers. We know we don't. We certainly can't pretend

in front of you that we do. We want you to help us find the best possible answer to the issues and challenges we face.

I believe that the American people need to know more about our foster care system and particularly those who are aging out of it. Most Americans don't know. But if they do know, we have found that they are responsive. More than three quarters of citizens polled about foster care strongly supported services that assist teens that are making that transition, and even said that they would be willing to pay more taxes to provide job placement, college tuition assistance and housing.

But if we don't get the information out to them, and your stories aren't told and your experiences aren't shared, then people won't know. And I want to emphasize something that Joy mentioned when she introduced me. I imagine that many of you who have been in foster care spend a considerable amount of time trying to avoid telling people that -- trying to pretend it wasn't so. And it may seem perhaps a little odd to be asked to share your experiences now, to talk about what you learned and what you saw or what could be better. But we have no better resources than each of you.

I remember very well the big event in the East Room of the White House a few years ago. I invited various states to come with children who were in the foster care system who were waiting for adoption. And I wanted Americans to know that there were a lot of good, smart, saavy, sweet young people who were in our foster care system who would be an asset to any family.

One young woman from Kansas came with a poem she had written. And she stood up and she talked about her experience of being taken away from her family because of abuse, and how she was abandoned. From the time I was in the White House, she was thirteen and had been in five or six foster homes and because of various situations she was living in a group home.

She stood up to read her poem. She said she really didn't want a lot. She said "I want a place that I can call home. A place that I can call my own. A family I can love that loves me back." Somebody heard that poem and decided to adopt her.

I want every American to hear those words and be heard. Just as I listened to the stories of my mother and saw how determined she was that the family she had would never have the problems that she faced. I think there is a lot of people in

America who want to hear about your brilliance and hope and grit and determination. And I for one, whenever I can, will make sure those lessons and your voices get heard.

Thank you all very much.

TALKING IT OVER

BY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

RELEASE: WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 1998, AND THEREAFTER

This week, I witnessed a miracle -- actually 30 miracles. On Tuesday, here at the White House, I met 30 children who woke up in the morning as foster children but went to bed that night as members of permanent, loving families.

I met 12-year-old Charday Mays. She and her brother, Steven, who is 11, have lived in many different foster homes. But on Tuesday, both children were adopted by Edward and Rochelle Mays. Charday says, "This Thanksgiving, Steven and I have so much to be thankful for. We are now officially part of a family. That makes me very, very happy."

Ellen Wells had tears in her eyes as she described how it felt to finally adopt 8-year-old Jessica. When she moved in with Ellen, Jessica had just turned 7 -- and had lived in seven foster homes. That first day, Jessica sat down at the table and asked, "So, after this house, where do I have to go?" Ellen was dumbstruck. She says, "I understood that I was forever. Jessica did not." On Tuesday, as Jessica happily munched cookies with the other children, her eyes told the story. Now, she knows that Ellen is her mother -- forever.

Jessica, Charday and Steven were at the White House as part of Washington, D.C.'s 12th annual Adoption Day, a day when the city's Superior Court judges invite a number of families to finalize their adoptions together in celebration of National Adoption Month and as an inspiration to others to consider adopting. I was pleased to host this year's event at the White House.

In addition to the new families, we were joined by Washington, D.C.'s Mayor-elect, Anthony Williams, and Dave Thomas, founder of the Wendy's restaurant chain, both of whom were adopted. Williams was 3 when his mother took him in. Foster-care officials warned her that, because he had not yet spoken his first word, he would be trouble and never amount to anything. Today, he says with a grin, "I was some trouble, but I did amount to something."

Thomas, adopted at 6 weeks, is one of this country's leading adoption advocates. This week, he challenged corporate America to extend maternity benefits to adoptive parents.

Judge Eugene Hamilton presided over the ceremony. He and his wife, Virginia, have cared for 40 foster children in their home over the past 20 years, adopting two of them. He noted, "I hope the commitment we see here today will inspire many others to come forward."

The President, who shares this hope, has set a national goal to double the number of adoptions and permanent placements in this country by the year 2002. A year ago, in order to move toward that goal, he signed the Adoption and Safe Families Act, which reformed our nation's child welfare system, making it clear that the health and safety of children come first.

The Act shortened the time it takes to make permanent placement decisions for children, guaranteed health insurance coverage for special-needs children, created new financial incentives for states to increase adoptions and funded services to keep families together when appropriate.

In addition, the President provided parents the opportunity to take time off to adopt a child by signing the Family and Medical Leave Act. And he has worked to end discrimination and delays based on race and ethnicity and created tax breaks to make it easier for families to adopt.

But although adoptions in this country have increased in the last year, there are still too many children who don't have permanent and safe families. Our job is not done.

For each of the 30 wonderful children who were adopted on Tuesday, there are 100 more just like them still in D.C.'s foster-care system. Nationwide, there are 100,000 children waiting to be adopted.

So, this week, the President asked Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala to devise a plan for a national, Internet-based registry of eligible foster children. Simply telling their stories and showing their pictures can go far in placing children in permanent homes. According to one advocate, this "is the single most important thing we can do to find homes for kids."

Every child deserves a safe and permanent family. At Thanksgiving, every child deserves to know that there is a seat waiting at the table -- in good times and in bad. And every child deserves to know that the table will be filled not only with food but also with laughter and with love.

I know that this Thanksgiving will be special for Charday, Jessica, Steven and every one of the other 27 children I met this week. As I celebrate the holiday with my family, I will pray that next Thanksgiving every other child who needs a permanent and loving family will have one.

Happy Thanksgiving, everyone.

To find out more about Hillary Rodham Clinton and read her past columns, visit the Creators Syndicate web page at www.creators.com.

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TALKING IT OVER
BY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Bill and I get a lot of letters. Some ask me for advice on hairstyles. Others ask him for golf tips. But the best letters are always from kids. I'll never forget the letter he got from a young boy in Iowa. It said, "Dear Mr. President, My name is Rollie. I like to play football and basketball. I've been waiting eight years for an adoptive family. I'm hoping for a family with pets, a brother and a sister, and nice parents."

Thanks to a new law Bill signed this week, the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, more children like Rollie will have their hopes fulfilled. This law holds out the promise that all children in our foster care system will have a chance to find what every child deserves -- loving parents and a safe, permanent home.

Right now, there are half a million children in foster care. For most of them, foster care is a safe haven on the road to a permanent home. Too many, however, make countless detours along the way, shuffling from family to family, without much hope that they'll ever find parents to love and take care of them.

This new law will come to their aid. It is the direct result of the President's commitment to improving the lives of all children. And it will help meet his goal of doubling by the year 2002 the number of kids who are adopted or placed in permanent homes each year.

Here's what this legislation will do:

-- With this law, the health and safety of children will always be the first priority. The best chance children have in this life is with parents who love them -- and we must always do our best to give them that. But we cannot ever leave children in unsafe homes. Under this law, states will no longer be required to try to keep children with parents who tortured, abandoned or chronically abused a child. When this happens, a child will be on a fast track to a safe, permanent home. Furthermore, states will conduct criminal background checks of prospective foster and adoptive parents.

-- With this new law, foster care will become what it was always meant to be -- a temporary refuge en route to a permanent home -- not a place to grow up. For kids in foster care, hearings determining their future will be sped up by at least six months. For children who have been in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months, states must move forward to terminate parental rights except in narrowly specified circumstances. For children who cannot be safely returned to their families, states must do all they can to find a permanent place to call home. And states now will receive financial incentives to

increase the number of foster care children who are adopted each year -- especially those with special needs.

This new law removes another barrier -- it gets rid of the obstacles that keep families from adopting children across state and county lines. It also tells children with special needs: You will continue to have health insurance under Medicaid or the new State Child Health Insurance Program. And it tells parents that our government will work harder to strengthen families and prevent child abuse and neglect.

-- With this new law, we are going to demand accountability by basing state performance on the only yardstick that matters: results. The Department of Health and Human Services will develop an annual report card to show how states are measuring up -- including the number of adoptions they've completed and the amount of time children are staying in foster care.

Regardless of age, religion or race, all the children I've met over the years have had one important thing in common: All of them needed parents in their lives. Someone to pick them up when they've fallen. Someone to teach them right from wrong. Someone to tuck them into bed at night. Someone simply to love them.

It is for this reason that, for more than 25 years, I've done my best to call attention to children in foster care and to see to it these children are not lost in the system and that those who cannot ever go home are freed for adoption.

The landmark bill my husband signed will go a long way toward making sure this happens. It's a historic opportunity -- one that couldn't have happened without extraordinary bipartisan work from members of Congress in both houses.

But this new law will not solve all that ails our child welfare system. Businesses can make it easier for their employees to adopt a child. Religious leaders can help spread the word about the joys of adoption. Parents thinking about adoption can expand their search to reach out to kids in foster care.

That's what Bernell and Della Neal did -- again and again and again. This week, the government honored them with a 1997 Adoption 2002 Excellence Award. These parents have adopted 11 children, many with severe physical and emotional needs. Though the Neals have faced tough challenges, they have shown that nothing is impossible. Their family motto is "There's always room for one more."

Because of this new law, that will be the motto for other families as well.

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November 18, 1997

DRAFT

FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

COLUMN FOR NOVEMBER 20, 1997

There is no greater tragedy for any family than when parents are unable or unwilling to care for their children. And there is no greater challenge for society than to decide what to do with children in these circumstances.

Today, nearly half a million children are in foster care, separated from their parents because of abuse or neglect. For most of these children, foster care is a temporary safe haven until they can return home. But for others, it's a bleak waiting game that can go on for years. Shuffled from family to family; they have little hope of being reunited with their birth parents or finding permanent placement with adoptive parents who will care for them and love them.

While there is no quick fix for the foster care crisis, and no fool-proof formula for deciding every foster care case, our nation took a giant step this week in improving the prospects for children in need of permanent homes. At a ceremony in the Rose Garden, the President signed legislation that, for the first time, will put the interest of children first when it comes to adoption and foster care. [NOTE: needs more emotion here, something personal would help.]

This new law gives states greater flexibility in assessing when and whether parents are able to meet their responsibilities to their children. States will no longer be required to reunify families who have come apart due to “aggravated circumstances”, like torture, abandonment or sexual abuse. At the same time, the law will redouble efforts to keep families together by helping families overcome problems that can lead to family instability.

The new law will give states financial incentives to increase the number of adoptions by assuring prospective adoptive parents that children with special needs will retain their health care coverage. It also will require states to come to quicker resolution about permanent plans for foster children. And the new law will provide funding for the education and training of judges who must decide the fate of children in the foster care system.

This legislation surely will ease the pain and confusion that so often marks foster care cases. For too long, in courtrooms across America, children have been caught in a legal tug of war in which their own rights must compete with the noble, but sometimes unrealistic, ideal of family reunification.

I remember once representing a foster family in Arkansas that wanted to adopt a four-year old boy who had been in their care for three years. The boy had been abandoned by a mother who suffered from psychological problems and he showed all the symptoms of severe mistreatment; he had gained little weight, was unresponsive and shied away from human contact.

But in his foster family he began to thrive. Still, when his foster parents tried to adopt him, the state adoption agency refused. Instead, state officials began to consider returning him to his birth mother, who had filed suit to get him back.

It seemed clear that keeping the little boy with his foster parents was in his best interest. What was not clear was whether his health and safety was the priority that counted most in a court of law.

Thankfully, the judge allowed the foster parents to adopt the boy, giving him the opportunity that all children need and deserve: to grow up in a safe, loving, and stable family.

Not all of us are parents, but all of us have been children. We all know the importance of having a caring permanent family - either because we have been fortunate enough to have had the experience or because we are painfully aware of what we have missed.

I know that laws are not the answer to all of our nation's problems. A loving home and responsible parents are not things that can be legislated. But laws can help protect our most vulnerable children and smooth their paths to stable homes with mothers and fathers who want to take them in.

That's what this new law does. And what better gift can we give this Thanksgiving week than the hope for tens of thousands of children in foster care that they, too, may soon know the joy of spending the holiday season with a family that cares for them and loves them.

TALKING IT OVER
BY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

In the short span of a week, the world lost two remarkable people: Princess Diana and Mother Teresa. Though separated by a multitude of differences, these two women were united by their desire to help others. As I flew to London to attend Diana's funeral, I thought of the pictures I had seen of the two of them together. Like so many others, I was left to wonder what we were going to do to keep the spirit of service they embodied alive.

Long before I ever met Mother Teresa, I knew of her work and mission to bring love and comfort to the poor and afflicted in India and around the world.

Still, nothing I had heard or read about her prepared me for the diminutive, determined and joyful woman I met at the National Prayer Breakfast in February 1994. Bill and I greeted her before the program started, and when she asked if she could see us privately afterward, we quickly agreed.

Standing on a step so she could see over the podium, Mother Teresa mesmerized an audience packed into the largest ballroom in Washington. She spoke without notes, calling on all of us to care for the poor and defenseless in society and making a plea against abortion.

After her speech, Bill and I sat together with Mother Teresa on folding chairs in the work space behind the curtain at the back of the stage. She took my hand in both of hers and told me she had been praying for me and my husband and for the work we were trying to do, especially in trying to provide health care to the poor. We also discussed abortion. Though we disagreed respectfully about birth control and whether abortion should be legal, we agreed that adoption should be promoted. We talked about doing more to make adoption a realistic option for pregnant women who do not want to keep their children -- and to make adoption easier for qualified adults who want to provide a child with a permanent, loving home.

Then, Mother Teresa asked me to help her open a shelter in Washington, D.C., for infants and young children awaiting adoption or placement with foster families. I said I would, though I had no idea how. I did, however, have the feeling that keeping my promise to Mother Teresa would involve a fair amount of hard work.

To find a way through the complicated legal and regulatory issues that surround opening such a home in the District of Columbia, I set up a coalition of community leaders and government representatives. The process took a year and a half. Over

that time, I had the joy of corresponding with Mother Teresa. Letters would arrive, written in her own hand, telling me where she had been and what she had been doing and asking, of course, how we were coming with the house for children -- "the gift of love" she called it. At the top of each letter was an inscription: "As long as you did it to one of these My least brethren. You did it to me."

I saw that Scriptural lesson in action when Chelsea and I traveled to India the following year. In New Delhi, we visited a home for children run by the Missionaries of Charity -- the order Mother Teresa founded in 1950. The building we walked through was crowded with cribs holding babies. As I examined the surroundings, I thought about the struggle I was having back in Washington trying to fulfill my promise to open a home for babies there. There is no way the New Delhi home could have passed muster with the regulators in D.C., but the crowded rooms contained something no regulation could ever provide: enormous love for children who had been left to fend for themselves.

The next time I saw Mother Teresa was back in Washington for the long-awaited opening of the Mother Teresa Home for Infant Children on June 19, 1995. Before the ceremony, Mother Teresa and I toured the home with the Sisters who would staff it. We were delighted by the sunny rooms filled with bassinets, changing tables and rockers. Before we went outside to cut the ribbon, she said to me: "This is a gift of love but I've been told I cannot give the gift of peace because I don't give peace to anyone." What she meant, I believe, is that her work compelled her to "disturb the peace," to upset the complacency of the comfortable to help the poor.

From the moment she received a calling from God "to serve Him among the poorest of the poor" to the moment she passed away at 87, Mother Teresa gave selfless service, love and, yes, peace to countless others. It is in honor of her memory and her work that I will travel to Calcutta on behalf of the President to attend her funeral on Saturday. It is only fitting that people of different faiths from all over the world will come together to express their sorrow at her loss -- and to be reminded, once again, that feeding a child, healing a wound and caring for the dying ultimately help repair the human spirit.

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September 9, 1997

TALKING IT OVER

BY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The reality of foster care was brought home to Bill and me when we met a teenage boy at the White House this winter. Bill asked him where he was from. "Fairfax County," the boy said. When Bill asked where in the county, the boy shrugged and answered, "All over."

Unfortunately, thousands of children in our foster care system today have similar stories to tell. Because of the complex regulations, outdated assumptions, and understaffed and overwhelmed agencies of our child welfare system, too many children spend their formative years shuttling from one foster home to another. Today, even children lucky enough to find adoptive families will have waited an average of three years or more in a series of temporary homes.

But that can change. The Senate and the House of Representatives are both considering bills that will take important steps toward making sure that no child languishes in foster care.

Currently, a child's case can drag on for years in the foster care system as authorities make repeated attempts to reunite a child with his or her biological parents. Often, these parents, for a variety of reasons, are unable to change the behavior that caused them to lose their child in the first place. If either bill becomes law, "reasonable efforts" to return a child to his or her family would not be required in extreme cases such as torture, abandonment, or physical or sexual abuse. Court hearings to determine the placement of a child would be required within 12 months -- instead of the current 18 months -- of his or her arrival in the foster care system. To make clear their purpose, these hearings would be renamed "permanency planning hearings."

As a children's advocate and lawyer who has represented parents and children in their struggles with the foster care system for more than 25 years, I believe these steps are long overdue. In 1973, I wrote an article about children's rights under the law, specifically their rights in family situations that pose serious threats to their health and safety. Even a few years ago, some considered this view controversial. Critics suggested that by supporting a child's right to a loving family, I advocated giving government more power to break up biological families and giving children the right to bring trivial disputes with their parents -- such as bedtime or who takes out the garbage -- to court.

Thankfully, that erroneous interpretation of my views has given way to a new bipartisan consensus around the idea that protecting our children from harm and working to provide them with permanent, loving families -- even when that may entail separating

them from their biological parents -- should be a priority of our child welfare system. Finally, we are recognizing that there are parents who will never be able to care for their children. And, in order to secure a foster child's well-being and stable development, we as a society have the responsibility to decide as quickly as possible whether a child can return home safely.

Many of the provisions in the House and Senate bills reflect recommendations made in Adoption 2002, a report prepared by the Department of Health and Human Services in response to the President's directive to identify the barriers to adoption and double the number of children placed annually in permanent homes by the year 2002.

Over the years, my husband has dedicated a great deal of time and energy to *improving foster care and promoting adoption*. As a result of the Administration's efforts, it is now illegal to deny or delay an adoption simply because the prospective parents and child are not of the same race. And last year, the President signed into law a \$5,000 tax credit to help families adopt children.

Federal leadership is crucial, but it will take the commitment of people from all corners of our country to bring about the sweeping change our child welfare system requires. This week, I'll be speaking at a national conference on adoption and child welfare reform sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The conference will bring together business and religious leaders, policy-makers, elected officials, judges, child advocates, and foster and adoptive families to discuss strategies to reduce the number of waiting children and limit the time a child spends in foster care to no more than one year.

The Kellogg Foundation has been working to reform child welfare systems in 11 states and localities. Last year alone, the foundation helped find permanent families for 7,000 children. This was possible because the foundation worked with churches and mounted aggressive media campaigns to recruit prospective adoptive families. And it helped child welfare agencies reform case work procedures, consolidate records and modernize data collection methods so that no child becomes lost in the system.

Now we must build on their work. With thousands of children leading transient lives in foster care, we cannot afford any more delays. We need to encourage Congress to pass the best adoption bill possible. Thousands of innocent children are counting on us.

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June 24, 1997

TALKING IT OVER

BY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Last week in the Oval Office, 7-year-old Adam looked uncomfortable. He stared down at the floor, at the ceiling, anywhere but at the President, who had asked him a question. Adam, who is living in foster care, had come to watch the President deliver his weekly radio address about the new steps his administration is taking to streamline and encourage adoption.

After the radio address and a discussion with adoptive families, Bill invited Adam to sit behind his desk and to explore the nooks and crannies of the Oval Office. Within minutes, Adam came out of his shell. He was full of smiles and questions as he made himself comfortable in the huge leather chair and inspected Bill's coin and badge collection.

I found it difficult to believe that this beaming and vivacious child had no permanent place to call home. Adam is just one of the thousands of children in communities across our country -- children with tremendous capacities to love and bring new joy and energy into a home -- who are still waiting for the love of a mother, a father and a family. These children live with few constants but painful memories of neglect or abuse, growing case files and the hope that someday they will join loving, permanent families.

My husband and I have considered adopting ourselves, but as Bill said in a recent interview: "If ... we were going to adopt a little baby at our age, if we stayed healthy, we could raise the child, but I think it is very important for people to bond with an infant, and it would require massive amounts of time that I don't know whether we could guarantee the child at this moment. If you took an older child that would have a bigger, more difficult adjustment period and would think it was a little weird living in the White House, then that also would require a lot of time. So, I'm doubtful that we could do it right here."

We are, however, both committed to doing whatever we can to help move our country's waiting children out of the limbo of foster care. Earlier this year, the President signed a \$5,000 tax credit to help families adopt children. In 1994, the administration and Congress put an end to racial preferences for adoption, making it illegal to deny or delay any child a loving home simply because the adoptive parents are of a different race. And at the radio address last week, as adoptive families and waiting children watched, the President announced more encouraging news for the tens of thousands

of children in our country's foster-care system and the families who could someday offer them love and permanent homes.

Bill issued a new directive that calls upon his administration to take definite steps to double the number of children who are placed in permanent homes, from 27,000 a year today to 54,000 a year by 2002. By early next year, Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala will report to the President on how the federal government can help states set and meet new adoption targets. She will study how local, state and federal authorities can best work together to encourage adoption in all communities, and she'll make recommendations about the laws and regulations that need to be changed or added to ensure children don't get trapped in foster care.

The President has also asked the secretaries of Treasury, Labor, Commerce and Health and Human Services to launch an all-out effort to heighten public awareness about adoption and recognize those in the private sector who are committing themselves to this important cause. There are already many businesses, television stations, foundations and citizens who are working hard to spread the word about waiting children and to support parents who want to adopt. The National Adoption Center and Children Awaiting Parents maintain a web site called "Faces of Adoption" (www.inetcom.net/adopt/photo.html) with 280 photos of brothers and sisters who need to be adopted together and children between the ages of 7 and 16 who are waiting to be adopted. It also offers comprehensive information on adoption, from support-group lists to legislative news and strategies for financial assistance.

During this holiday season, as we make time to be with our families and recognize how much we love and rely on our parents, spouses, children and other relatives, let us all work together to find loving homes for the boys and girls who need them.

Write to Hillary Rodham Clinton at 71154,1271, and include the First Lady's name in your subject line and a U.S. postal address. Mrs. Clinton welcomes readers' comments, but the volume of mail prevents her from answering each letter personally.

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TALKING IT OVER**BY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON****FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

The woman visited her new daughter in the hospital every day, reaching into the incubator to stroke her foot. The receiving blanket seemed heavier than the baby, who was being fed by a tube in her stomach.

The woman is not the baby's birth mother, but she is her mother in every way that matters.

She and her husband already had a 3-year-old adopted son when they heard about a premature 1-pound baby girl whose birth parents could not take care of her. The couple decided to adopt the tiny baby. Her start was rocky, but now the child is a healthy 3-year-old.

"She was just like a little flower that blossomed," the mother says. "She is a burst of energy."

Now, the couple, who are African-American, are in the process of adopting a 12-year-old girl who was abused. They also are encouraging more African-American families to open their homes to children in need.

Last summer, I wrote about this important issue. I'm writing about it again because so many children's lives would be better if they could only find a home. Today, 21,000 children are ready and waiting for families to nurture and care for them. Tens of thousands of others will be eligible for adoption in the coming months and years.

Not all these children are healthy, white babies. Many are physically and developmentally disabled. Many are minorities. Many suffer from emotional traumas wrought by abuse, neglect and unstable living arrangements. And many are teenagers who already have been shuffled from home to home.

Fortunately, some steps have been taken in recent years to make adoption easier. The Family and Medical Leave Act, which became law three years ago, ensures that parents can take time off when they adopt a child without fear of losing their jobs. The Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 prohibits adoption agencies from denying the placement of a child solely on the basis of the adoptive parents' race, color or national origin. Over the past three years, adoption subsidies have helped an increasing number of families cope with the costs of adopting and raising children with special needs.

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The President is supporting legislation in Congress that will give tax credits to families that adopt. The House, for example, just approved a bill that would give adoptive families a \$5,000 tax credit. The Senate, meanwhile, is considering a \$7,500 credit for families who adopt children with special needs. This may not be enough to cover medical and emotional health care costs for special-needs kids, or even education, but it's a step in the right direction.

Not only is adoption good for children, it saves taxpayers a lot of money. As one woman said at a recent adoption discussion at the White House her family has saved the state and the federal government in excess of \$1 million by adopting several special-needs children.

In addition to government, the private sector also has a role to play. Wendy's, the hamburger chain founded by adoption advocate Dave Thomas (who himself was adopted), gives workers paid leave and financial assistance with adoption costs.

Margaret Fitzgerald, who participated in our gathering, said her employer, AT&T, gave her six weeks of unpaid leave when she and her husband adopted a son four years ago. The company also reimbursed her legal fees.

But the most important thing of all is for more people to reach out and give every child, regardless of age, disability, race or ethnic origin, the chance to be part of a loving family.

Just ask Julie Stinger, a teacher with five adopted children -- four biracial and one white -- several of whom had health problems. She told us how, as a white woman, she had to fight to adopt her first two black children, even though the birth parents agreed to the adoption and she had cared for them as a foster parent for 18 months. "I fought tooth and nail," she said.

Later, she had similar trouble when she wanted to adopt her fifth child, who is white. Authorities were concerned about placing a white boy with four non-white brothers and sisters.

"Even though we went through some traumas in the adoptions, I would do it again, I would do it 10 times over," she said. "Adopting a child is the most gratifying thing that ever happened to me."

After Julie recounted her story, I asked her oldest son, Joey, if he had anything to add. He nodded.

"I just want to thank my mother," he said.

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May 14, 1996

TALKING IT OVER

HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

RELEASE: WEEKEND, JULY 29-30, 1995

The first time I met Mother Teresa was not in an urban slum or a remote village in India but in the fancy ballroom of a Washington hotel. It was February 1994, and she had just delivered a speech against abortion at the National Prayer Breakfast. When she finished her remarks, she pulled me aside for a chat.

She told me about her homes for orphaned children in New Delhi and Calcutta and asked for my help in setting up a similar home for abandoned and neglected babies in Washington, D.C. I agreed to work on the project. Although we differ on some issues, we found common ground on adoption. So we sat and talked about how to find homes for the hundreds of thousands of American children who need loving families.

A year later, my daughter and I visited Mother Teresa's home for children in New Delhi. There were too many cribs and too few toilets, and there was too little space. There was no way the place could ever pass inspection in any American city. But there were also dozens of beautiful babies, mostly girls, being fed, clothed, sheltered and loved until they could be adopted.

These images stayed with me when I returned home. I was even more determined to help Mother Teresa bring to Washington the compassion I had witnessed in India. But you cannot imagine how much red tape was getting in my way. Ironically, many regulations designed to protect children often overlook what kids need most: love and attention.

Finally, on a sweltering day this past June, the Mother Teresa Home for Children opened in an affluent residential neighborhood of the nation's capital. It is a two-story Tudor house with a swimming pool in the backyard, donated by a remarkably generous person who chose to remain anonymous. At the dedication ceremony, Mother Teresa -- happy, enthusiastic and all business -- took me on a tour. Grabbing my hand and leading me up the stairs, she walked me through brightly painted rooms filled with cribs, bassinets and stuffed animals.

Although it will accommodate only eight children at a time, this home is a crucial step in awakening Americans to the crisis of adoption.

We should worry less about how many cribs can be placed in a room and more about how many children can be placed with loving families. And instead of yelling at each other about abortion, we should spend our energy making adoptions easier. If that were to happen, there would be far fewer abortions and far more children in happy homes.

Today, there are about 450,000 children in the United States who need permanent families. There are tens of thousands of parents seeking to adopt.

Yet every day, complex regulations, outdated assumptions and wrong-headed laws stand in the way of bringing these parents and children together.

For some Americans, like a woman who wrote to me recently, cost is the biggest barrier. She and her husband, both musicians, spent thousands of dollars adopting a little boy six years ago. He is, she said, "the joy of our life." When her cousin's daughter recently became pregnant at age 18 and could not afford to keep the child, this same couple volunteered to adopt again.

As simple as this case should have been -- the parents and baby were members of the same extended family and all parties agreed to the adoption -- it still cost upward of \$4,000 because of legal fees and paperwork.

For others, there is a fear factor. Like many Americans, a 40-year-old newscaster I met recently in New Mexico was interested in adopting but was discouraged by highly publicized cases like Baby Richard's. However rare they are, cases in which birth parents seek to reclaim custody of adopted children undermine people's faith in the adoption system.

Decisions to give up children for adoption should be difficult to overturn, especially in the cases of children who become attached to their adoptive families during their formative years, like Baby Richard. The decision to return the child to the biological parents or to uphold the adoption should be made as quickly as possible. No child should be left in limbo.

The whole process also is made more difficult because of a historical bias against interracial adoptions, which can mean endless waiting until children are matched with parents of the same race.

In a perfect world, most of us would choose parents who shared our cultural and racial identities. But our world is not perfect. Today, there are far more minority children needing homes than are being placed for adoption. To prevent these children from languishing in foster care, new guidelines are now in place that will prohibit federally funded agencies from using race as a factor in placing children.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we did something dramatic about adoption? Why not set a goal of placing 100,000 children each year for the next five years? To do this, we would have to make adoption easier and enlist volunteer lawyers and judges to speed up the legal process. And we should also follow Mother Teresa's model, in which considerations like money, regulations and skin color do not outweigh the more important gift of love that adoptive parents want to offer.

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First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
National Adoption Month Event
The White House - East Room
November 24, 1998

Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you, thank you so much and welcome to the East Room of the White House. We are delighted to host this event.

A few weeks ago, I received an invitation to attend a wonderful celebration at the D.C. Superior Court House, where a number of adoptions would be made final. I was so pleased to be invited to this event, but I thought to myself maybe there is a way that we could celebrate these adoptions -- that really represent all of the adoptions in our country -- during National Adoption Month, which is November, here in the White House. So we asked Chief Judge Eugene Hamilton if we could host it at the White House, and I was delighted when he said yes. And I want to thank the Chief Judge and I want to thank all the judges of the D.C. Superior Court for their commitment to adoption and the work that they have done, and I welcome all of them here.

So today in this room there are 30 children from Washington, D.C., who woke up this morning as foster children and will go to bed tonight as permanent members of families. I want to thank these 24 families for allowing us to share in their celebration. And I want to thank this year's Adoption 2002 winners, who were just introduced by Secretary Shalala, and all of the advocates and experts and policy makers and parents who are here, who work night and day to make these kinds of happy endings possible.

Secretary Shalala told us about what children think about love, and all of us are grateful for her leadership in making sure that they do have love in their lives, as well as good health and other kinds of supports. I'm also pleased to welcome Governor and Mrs. Edgar, Senator Levin, Senator Landrieu, Congressman Oberstar, Mayor Barry, and other distinguished guests. We are fortunate to have some special speakers as part of today's program.

Dave Thomas and Mayor Elect Williams are real experts in adoption. Not only because of the jobs they have and will have, but because of the fact that they were adopted themselves. You have already heard from Dave Thomas, who has reached out to the business community to demonstrate his corporation's commitment to adoption, and I hope that more companies will take up his challenge to include adoption benefits in the benefits they offer employees. He wants to ensure that all foster children have the same chance he did. We'll hear from Chief Judge Hamilton, who has adopted four children himself. What's more, in 20 years he and his wife Virginia have been foster parents for more than 40 children. We'll hear from Mayor-Elect of our nation's capitol, Tony Williams. At the age of 3 he was living in foster care and had not spoken a word. Now, Mayor-Elect, some of us who have heard you speak can not hardly believe that, but there were plans afoot by the state to institutionalize him. After the D.C. primary he said that

when his parents adopted him they gave him a second chance, and now the city has adopted him as well. We'll hear from Charday Mays. Charday's mother says she likes swimming, singing in the choir, and -- like most pre-teens -- talking on the telephone. She and her brother Steven are two of the 30 children who will, as of today, have a new permanent family.

Now, probably everyone in this room could have a similar story to tell, and I hope you do tell them. I hope you tell them to as many people as you possibly can to increase awareness, and acceptance, and enthusiasm about adoption.

You know, my husband just came from a traditional Thanksgiving pardon of a turkey. Now some of you may not be aware of this tradition, but each year starting with President Truman, one lucky turkey is picked out as the chosen one. So instead of being stuffed, dressed, and on your plate next to sweet potatoes, this turkey will go on living and being a symbol of the important power of the President of the United States.

And you know, each of us have many different traditions in our families about Thanksgiving. The food that we eat might somewhat vary from region to region, or ethnic group to ethnic group. The battles we have over the T.V. remote control between football and parades, and everything else that's on. But there is one tradition that runs through Thanksgiving, and that is family.

You know when you are a part of a family you are supposed to be able to know that there will be a seat waiting for you in good times and bad times. And then in both times the table will be filled with people who care about you. That is what all children want and deserve. And when Bill and I started working on behalf of adoption when he first came to the White House, we were struck by how many wonderful children of all ages there are waiting to have that opportunity to be a part of a family. We asked a young boy, who was with us at an adoption event a few years ago in the Oval Office, where he lived, he answered, "All over," which of course means nowhere. So when it comes to our children, the American family has a lot to be thankful for this holiday season. Children are better off because of the Family and Medical Leave Act, which allows parents to take time off to adopt a child. They're better off because we are ending discrimination in adoption based on race or ethnicity. They're better off because of tax breaks which make it easier for families to adopt children, especially children with special needs. They're better off because the Congress put politics aside, put children first, and came across party lines to pass the landmark Adoption and Safe Families Act. And when the President signed that bill a year ago, he helped fulfill a promise that he had made to try to put the health and safety of our children first and to move children more quickly into safe and permanent homes -- to reach our goal of doubling the number of children adopted by the year 2002.

This celebration brings us one step further down that road. We are seeing families who have opened both their homes and their hearts to children who need both. Some parents today are keeping brothers and sisters together by adopting them all. Some are adopting their own foster children. Others are welcoming children with special needs into their families. Many are

adopting across racial lines, but they are giving children what every child needs -- a place to call home.

But we can't sit on our laurels and celebrate the progress because we have a hundred thousand children in our country who are eligible for adoption in our foster care system, but are still waiting. We have to work harder to implement our new laws effectively, to help our courts as they make the difficult heart-wrenching decisions about children as quickly as possible. We have to support families, communities, states, and social workers in the only surefire way to stop child abuse and neglect, and that is to prevent it before it happens. I hope we remember that for every one of the wonderful children being adopted today there are one hundred more like them in the D.C. foster care system. And I know we can do better. We have to turn our nation's Capitol into a model of how to care for our most vulnerable children. For there is no greater test of a city, of a country, of businesses, for parents, for communities, for religious organizations, advocates, or anyone else than how we treat those most vulnerable children in our midst.

It is now my great honor to turn the program over to Chief Judge Eugene Hamilton. As I mentioned earlier, he brings to the courtroom every day, not only 28 years of judicial experience on the D.C. Superior Court, but a lifetime of personal experience as a foster parent and adoptive parent. He understands better than most of us the challenges that face every child and every adult who come into contact with the child-welfare system, and what all of us must do to meet those challenges. Please join me in welcoming Chief Judge Hamilton.

**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
VIDEOTAPED REMARKS TO
THE COUNCIL ON ADOPTABLE CHILDREN'S
ANNUAL AWARDS CEREMONY
NEW YORK, NY
NOVEMBER 5, 1998**

Good evening. I want to thank you for honoring me with this award. I only wish I could be there in person to congratulate everyone associated with the Council on Adoptable Children for your 25 years of leadership on behalf of New York's most vulnerable children. From shortening the adoption process to matching over 2,000 special needs children with families, you have helped find stable and loving homes for the children of this great city.

Those of us who care about strengthening our nation's foster care system and improving adoptions have a lot to celebrate right now. Under the President's leadership, we passed the Family and Medical Leave Act, which gives time off to parents who adopt a child. We provided a tax credit for families who adopt. We've worked to eliminate discrimination and delays based on race and ethnicity.

And it is particularly fitting that we gather today, as it was almost exactly one year ago that the President signed into law the Adoption and Safe Families Act -- a landmark piece of legislation that was the result of the hard work and dedication of so many of you.

By signing that bill, the President helped to fulfill his promise to make the child welfare system work better for the children it serves. To always put their health and safety first. And to move children more quickly into safe and permanent homes. This law will help us to meet the President's goal of doubling the number of children adopted or permanently placed by the year 2002.

But, realizing these goals will take the sustained commitment not only of federal, state, and local governments, but of private partners as well. And no one understands that better than the Council on Adoptable Children. With your continuing energy and expertise, your vision and dedication, we can help make sure that all children grow up with parents who love them...and a safe, permanent place to call home.

Thank you again for this award and honor -- and for your extraordinary commitment to the children of New York. I hope you have a wonderful evening.

FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
VIDEO REMARKS FOR NATIONAL ADOPTION CENTER IN PHILADELPHIA
MAY 5, 1998

Good evening and congratulations on 25 years of extraordinary work on behalf of America's children. When the National Adoption Center opened its doors a quarter-century ago, no one knew whether anyone would be interested in adopting a child with Down's syndrome, or a child who was physically disabled, or groups of three or four or more siblings. But since then, Carolyn Johnson and the many other dedicated people at NAC have shown us that there is no such thing as an unwanted child. There are just unfound parents. Today, thanks to your dedication and hard work, nearly 8,000 children have been placed in permanent homes. And thanks to the leadership of people like Dave Thomas, adoption is being encouraged around the country as a wonderful way to build a family.

As many of you know, last year Congress passed -- and my husband signed -- the historic Adoption and Safe Families Act. This law will help thousands of children waiting for foster care to move more quickly into safe and permanent homes. It makes sweeping changes in federal law that makes clear that the health and safety of children -- many of whom are victims of abuse -- must be the single greatest concern of state child welfare agencies. And I want to assure you that this administration will continue to work to ensure that no child ever has to grow up in our foster care system.

But all of us, not just government, have a role to play in making sure that our children have the opportunity to grow up in a loving and caring family. Just recently, the Department of Health and Human Services released a report showing that almost 1 million children were identified as victims of abuse or neglect in 1996. And over 1,000 of them died as result. These numbers are simply unacceptable. By working together -- whether we are in the government, or the private or non-profit sector -- we can make sure that no child is ever abused or neglected.

Once again, congratulations for making such a difference in the lives of so many young people. I hope you have a wonderful evening.

AS PREPARED

**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
REMARKS FOR THE W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION
FAMILIES FOR KIDS BY 2002 CONFERENCE
WASHINGTON, DC
JUNE 26, 1997**

It is a pleasure to be in the company of so many men and women who have contributed their talents and energies to the critical issue of adoption. Over the years, the Kellogg Foundation has made an unparalleled commitment to improving our foster care and adoption systems, and I am particularly grateful for the Foundation's participation in a discussion I held at the White House last summer about this subject.

Let me thank all of you involved with Kellogg and *Families for Kids* for your leadership in drawing attention to the plight of hundreds of thousands of children across our country who are needlessly languishing in foster care -- and for serving as models of what can be done to improve the child welfare system and bring more hope and security to children so desperately in need of both.

Not only are you heroes to countless children who have benefited from your efforts, you are breaking new ground for elected officials and policy makers -- in Washington and elsewhere -- who have much to learn from your example.

This conference could not be more timely. After years of inattention and partisan politics, we are finally forging a bipartisan consensus on Capitol Hill that could correct some of the most glaring flaws in the adoption process. Today we are within reach of bringing some common sense and compassion to an overburdened, understaffed and outdated foster care system.

Those of you who have worked on children's welfare issues -- as I have for the last 25 years -- have heard no shortage of stories about children who are shuttled from one foster home to another during their formative years.

I will never forget a case I handled about 15 years ago in Arkansas.

I represented a couple who wanted to adopt a four-year-old boy who had been in their foster care for three years. The boy had been badly neglected as a baby by his biological mother, who had psychological problems. When he was less than a year old, she turned him over to the local social service agency so she could follow a boyfriend to another state. At that point, the baby showed all the symptoms of severe mistreatment: he had gained little weight, he was unresponsive and he shied away from human contact.

But in his foster family, he began to thrive. And his foster parents fell in love with him. Even though they had signed the customary state contract prohibiting them from adopting him, they wanted to make him a permanent member of their family.

The state adoption agency refused their request. So the boy was going to be taken from the security of the family he knew and turned over to strangers on some adoption list. Meanwhile, the boy's birth mother filed suit to get him back, claiming she had overcome her problems.

I argued on behalf of the boy's foster parents that the best interests of the child should take precedence over both the birth mother's claims of her biological rights and the state's claims to its contractual agreement. I asked the judge to allow testimony from a child psychologist about the boy's progress in his foster family and about the possible consequences to his physical, intellectual and emotional development if he was separated from them. The judge, who had children and grandchildren of his own, didn't think he had much to learn from these witnesses, but he allowed them nonetheless. In the end, the psychologist's testimony weighed heavily in the judge's determination to allow the foster parents to adopt the boy.

Just as often, however, the child's best interests do not take precedence. And this sad reality is repeated throughout our nation. Antiquated rules and rigid presumptions continue to deny countless children the lasting family connections that can influence whether a child does well in school, stays away from drugs, and goes on to become a responsible, law-abiding adult.

Only recently have we begun to view issues regarding the health and safety of children in foster care through a clear lens -- instead of a fog of distortions and political rhetoric over what constitutes real "family values."

Clearly, no one wants children to be in situations where they are subjected to abuse, torture, starvation or neglect. In 1973, when I was just entering the world of children's advocacy and the law, I wrote an article about children's rights in family situations -- particularly those that pose a threat to their health and safety. As recently as a few years ago, some critics suggested that by supporting a child's right to a loving family, I favored giving government more power to break up biological families and giving children the right to bring trivial disputes with their parents -- like curfews or who takes out the garbage -- to court.

Thankfully, those erroneous interpretations have given way to a clearer consensus about which children should be placed back with their biological parents -- and which should not.

We are beginning to recognize that some parents simply are not capable of taking care of their own children -- and likely never will be. Think about Elisa Izquierdo, the four-year-old girl in New York City who was found starved to death in her family's home last year; or five-year-old Richard Holmes who was discovered earlier this year to have been tortured and abused in his own home in a Maryland suburb.

Clearly, these children and others like them would be better off growing up with the love and support of an adoptive family than with biological parents who put them in harm's way.

At the same time, we have to recognize that some parents who have had problems with their children can learn to be responsible but need help in coping with the stresses of parenthood and child-rearing. In these cases we must make sure that parents have the support and counseling they need.

Today, the House and Senate are considering bills that would bring more order, logic and compassion to the process.

Under both bills, "reasonable efforts" to return a child to his or her family would not be required in extreme cases such as torture, abandonment, physical or sexual abuse. Court hearings to determine the permanent placement of a child would be required within 12 months of his or her arrival in the foster care system, instead of the current 18 months. The hearings would be called "permanency planning hearings" to make clear the goal of the proceedings.

There are also provisions in the legislation to provide financial incentives to states to increase the number of adoptions from the public child welfare system -- and particularly to increase the number of adoptions of special needs children.

These are important steps toward ensuring that children no longer languish indefinitely in foster care. They are particularly critical for children who are traditionally hard to place: those with disabilities, who are medically frail, have siblings, or are minorities. As we embark on a national discussion about race relations, which the President called for earlier this month, let us take special note that a disproportionate number of children in foster care are African-American. These children can bring boundless joy to families, and families can bring boundless joy to them. But we have to work harder to ensure that these unions happen.

Let me be clear: The President is committed to working with Congress to achieve the goals you and the Administration share and to find the funding necessary to achieve the strongest adoption bill possible.

Many provisions in the House and Senate bills incorporate recommendations made in *Adoption 2002*, a report prepared by the Department of Health and Human Services in response to the President's directive to identify barriers to adoption and double the number of children placed annually in permanent homes by the year 2002.

Giving states flexibility to shorten the adoption process, highlighting strategies that are working, and providing incentives to meet adoption goals -- all part of the President's action plan -- build on other Administration efforts.

To break down financial, cultural and social barriers to adoption, the Administration has made it illegal to deny or delay an adoption on the basis of race. And the President has signed into law a \$5,000 tax credit for families who adopt, with an increase to \$6,000 for families who adopt children with special needs.

The President's chief concern has been -- and continues to be -- that no child is deprived of a safe and permanent home for one day longer than necessary. As he has said, he wants every state, every family court, every case worker in the country to understand that children's health and safety must be paramount in resolving these cases.

He is determined to work across party lines, at every level of government and with every sector of society, to give every child in America the security of a loving, nurturing and permanent home.

Yet while we all know that federal leadership is crucial, we also know that it is not enough to bring about the sweeping change our child welfare system requires.

That's where you come in.

I want to commend the Kellogg Foundation for bringing together policy makers, business and religious leaders, elected officials, judges, child advocates, and foster and adoptive families here to discuss strategies to reduce the number of children waiting to be adopted and to speed up the adoption process so that no child lingers in foster care for more than one year.

I also want to commend you for launching the *Families for Kids* initiative, which has already produced tangible results in eleven sites around the country, including:

- providing counseling for adoptive parents
- modernizing computer data
- bringing together churches to find permanent homes for foster children -- particularly special needs children
- making changes in the judicial system to address the needs of children in foster care.

As a result of these and other efforts undertaken as part of *Families for Kids*, 7,000 children were placed in permanent families last year. Many promising new partnerships are underway. And there are important lessons that can be replicated in every community and state across our country.

Today, we understand even more about the urgency of this mission. As the White House Conference on Early Childhood Development and Learning in April made clear, children need love, nurturing, stimulation and security from the moment they enter this world. Depriving them of consistency and permanence is depriving them of the chance to achieve their God-given potential.

At the same time, we must not overlook the critical difference that loving parents can make in the lives of older children as well. Children of all ages can benefit from the care and attention of a stable, loving family. And that's why your efforts are so crucial to bringing the best out in all of America's children, whether they are infants or adolescents.

I hope you will continue to lead our nation as we continue this important work. As Americans, we live in the most prosperous country in the world. Our economy is flourishing. We are known the world over for our compassion and generous spirit.

So let's meet this test and show that we really do stand for children. Let's give every child the gift of love that he or she deserves.

Thank you.

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**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR ADOPTION DINNER
WASHINGTON, D.C.
APRIL 16, 1997**

Talking Points

- Thank you very much, Lou (Davidson). I want to thank the National Council for Adoption for this very kind "Bully Pulpit" award. But most of all I want to thank you -- the members of the council -- for your consistent, energetic and strong leadership on behalf of adoptive families and the thousands of children in our country and around the world who urgently need safe, loving and permanent homes.
- Let me also congratulate tonight's honorees for their commitment to encouraging and facilitating adoption in our country. Every child deserves the chance to grow up with the love of a permanent family and we should never let anything get in the way of efforts to make sure it happens. I thank you for working together on this issue.
- As a long-time advocate for adoption, I've found much hope in the recent efforts on the part of so many, including most of you in this audience, to reform our foster care and strengthen our adoption systems. The President has worked with members of Congress on both sides of the aisle to make it illegal to deny or delay an adoption simply because the adoptive parents and children were not of the same race. And he's very proud of the new \$5,000 tax credit that will help families defray the costs of adoption.
- As you know, this winter, the President asked Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala to find effective ways to move children more rapidly from foster care to permanent homes, and to meet a national goal of doubling the number of children placed annually in permanent homes by the year 2002. The Adoption 2002 report is the result of that research. It is based on extensive interviews, surveys, and consultations with placement agencies, adoption and child welfare advocates, and social workers nationwide. And I am particularly pleased that careful attention was paid to the thoughts and observations of adoptive and foster parents because they know better than anyone the strengths and shortcomings of our system.
- As I travel around the country, I've met many grassroots adoption activists who've told me what a very real difference all of these efforts have made in their communities.
- And I assure you that the Administration will continue to work to ensure that no child ever has to grow up in our foster care system. We will make sure that steps to secure permanent, safe, and loving homes for children -- whether they are with their biological families or others -- begin as soon as a child enters foster care, not after 4 days or 5 months or 6 years of shuttling from placement to placement. And we will work with

partners from all across the community -- businesses, foundations, the media -- to raise public awareness and to encourage more families to experience the joys of adoption.

- Tomorrow, the President and I will host a Conference on Early Childhood Development and Learning. As science is telling us, the first three years of life are crucial to a child's intellectual, neurological and emotional development. Children who have adults to talk to them, to read to them, and to make them feel secure and loved throughout their earliest years will thrive. Those growing up without these influences are less likely to live up to their God-given potentials. That is why our task is so urgent, why we need to find permanent homes for our children as soon as we can.
- But at the same time, let us remember that it is never too late for a child to join an adoptive family. As many of you can attest, adoption at any stage of a child's life can truly be life-changing -- and life-saving.
- So let us continue to work together to bring the love of permanent families to all our children.

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