

Ruby: IVE/IVB ideas
~ Genie

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

From May 11 to May 15, I had the opportunity, along with an OMB examiner, to visit foster care, adoption assistance and other child welfare programs in Northern and Southern California. While the itinerary was comprehensive and a broad range of child welfare topics were covered, messages from regional, State and local officials, service providers, caseworkers and program participants were surprisingly consistent. This report provides a State profile and findings according to the major issue areas surrounding child welfare programs today.

GOALS OF SITE VISIT

The recently enacted Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) includes many provisions that signal a continuing Congressional interest in child welfare reform. Major provisions include: the authorization of fifty child welfare demonstration projects; the establishment of an advisory panel on kinship care; and, incentive payments for States that increase the number of foster child adoptions. In order to develop and analyze proposals for child welfare reform, the goals of my site visit of title IV-E (foster care, adoption assistance and Independent Living) and IV-B (Child Welfare Services and Promoting Safe and Stable Families, formerly Family Preservation and Support) programs were to:

- Understand how federal funding mechanisms affect State and local policy and financing decisions.
- Understand how IV-B programs such as Promoting Safe and Stable Families operate at the local level.
- Assess the implementation of ASFA and obtain State and local views on the legislation.
- Assess the State's child welfare demonstration project, which includes kinship care and the use of IV-E funds to provide IV-B services.
- Learn more about the court's role in the child welfare system.
- Understand the data reporting and case management system.
- Hear State and local concerns, issues and recommendations about the child welfare system in general.

I. ITINERARY

DAY ONE

- Met with **Regional Office staff** who explained their role, provided an overview of California's child welfare system, including implementation of the Adoption and Safe Families Act and the State's child welfare waiver.
- Met with the Judicial Council, the administrative office for the State Supreme Court. They implement the federal **Court Improvement Project** and have developed recommendations for improving statewide juvenile courts.
- Visited a local **kinship care support program**, the Edgewood Center, which provides relative caregivers, mostly grandparents, and children with services such as child risk assessments, counseling, on-site respite care (with recreational activities, computer and library facilities), off-site respite care (camping trips), transportation, and referrals. Also spoke with kinship caregivers to hear their concerns and feedback on the program.

DAY TWO

- Visited an **integrated child welfare services program**, the Futures Project. The school-based program offers a broad range of services through a partnership between the county and school district. Referred families meet with a multidisciplinary staff (nurse, mental health counselor, eligibility worker and social worker) to develop a plan incorporating a strategy for services.
- Met with the **San Francisco County staff** to discuss the State's **Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS)** for which they receive an enhanced federal match. After three years of implementation, operation at the county level has just begun. Prior to implementation, there was no way to track children across counties.

DAY THREE

- Met with **State Department of Social Services staff** to discuss implementation of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, the State's child welfare waiver, the Governor's Adoption Initiative, kinship care needs, and State priorities.
- **Roundtable discussion** with child welfare advocacy groups, foundations, local child welfare agencies, the State Department of Social Services staff. The strongest message: More flexibility to serve children in their homes in a multidisciplinary way.

DAY FOUR

- Visited a **transitional children's residential facility**, the MacLaren Children's Center, an emergency shelter for up to 300 children. Children can stay for a maximum of 30 days. A school, an infirmary, an Independent Living Program, and a store where children can redeem their good behavior coupons, are all on-site. Also visited a **transitional**

housing program for emancipated youth who live in an 8-unit housing complex for up to 18 months. At both sites, we met with children participating in the programs, social workers and teachers.

Visited a **family preservation and support program**, the Triangle Family Preservation Network. The program provides a broad range of services to at-risk families. A multidisciplinary team works with families to develop a service-delivery plan which can include: in-home counseling and specialized visitors to teach personal finance, housekeeping, role-modeling and parenting skills.

Visited the **Los Angeles County Child Abuse Hotline Center** which is staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Receiving up to 500 calls per day, staff screen calls for either an immediate response, a 5-day response, or no-response. Staff also use the SACWIS system to report incidents of child abuse.

Spoke with director and staff of the **Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services** to discuss effects of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, kinship care needs, family preservation and substance abuse treatment needs, and the reasons for the large increases in their foster care caseload.

DAY FIVE

Visited the Edmund G. Edelman **County Children's Court** which hears only dependency cases -- no delinquency cases. The family-friendly courthouse offers on-site services such as: shelter care for children awaiting court appearances, an underground lockup with secure elevator for incarcerated parents, referrals, and transportation.

Met with the LA County **Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)** director. The CASA is co-located at the Children's Court. CASAs are court-appointed to a specific case to make an independent investigation of the child's circumstances in the foster care system and to submit their findings to the court.

Visited a Los Angeles County **Probation Office** to discuss their IV-E claiming process and the joint assessments (probation and county child welfare) of probation children with protective service needs.

Visited the **Girls Republic Group Home** which houses eight girls who have committed misdemeanors and felonies. Girls between the ages of 13 and 18 stay for up to one year, attend a local school, and receive services in a very structured program emphasizing self-esteem and responsibility. We spoke with the director and residents.

II. CALIFORNIA STATE PROFILE

FY 1997 FEDERAL EXPENDITURES FOR CALIFORNIA

Program	Actual FY 1997	% of Total
Adoption Assistance	\$65,525,844	7%
Foster Care	\$779,057,607	84%
Independent Living Program	\$12,481,776	1%
IV-B, part 1, Child Welfare Services	\$33,954,776	4%
IV-B, part 2, Promoting Safe and Stable Families	\$33,398,317	4%
TOTAL	\$924,418,320	100%

FOSTER CARE CASELOAD

Caseload size is a useful indicator of the magnitude of child welfare issues. For most States, the foster care population shifts continuously. Because foster care is, ideally, a temporary placement, children exit and enter the system daily. If an aggregate caseload appears stable, children are moving in and out of foster care at a consistent rate. Any changes result from an imbalance between entrances and exits.

According to the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive, there were 32,520 foster care children in California in 1983. By November 1997, that figure tripled to 96,791 foster children. With a 163 percent cumulative increase, California's foster care population is not only the largest in the nation, but also the second-fastest growing, after Illinois. The two largest States, California and New York, together contain over two-thirds of foster children.

For California, the dramatically increasing caseload means that entrances are outpacing exits. Most of this growth was concentrated between 1987 and 1989, and is largely attributable to an increase in kinship care nationwide (described in section IV). Because relatives generally provide consistent and safe care, children tend to stay longer than in non-relative care. As a result, this population is driving a huge increase in foster care caseloads because overall entries are outpacing exits. Local service providers, Los Angeles and San Francisco County officials all report that the underlying cause of the rise in kinship care is increasing substance abuse among parents. According to State and local officials, **a typical foster care case in California is a child who is living with their grandparents because his/her parents are abusing drugs.**

Among those children who enter the California foster care system for the first time, 53 percent are reunified with their own families, and most of these reunifications relatively soon compared to other exits. Almost 10 percent of first-time entries are adopted. The remaining children are eventually placed in out-of-home placements, age out of the system, or run away. According to AFCARS data, of the 96,791 children currently in out-of-home placements, 28 percent are in group homes, one-third are in relative foster care homes, one-third are in non-relative foster care homes. The monthly foster care maintenance payment for a two-year old is \$345.

Child welfare in California is administered by each of the 58 counties. Because each county has different protocols for placing children, the State's primary role is in interjurisdictional placements. To facilitate this role, the Governor's Adoption Initiative has just begun operating a Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (described in section VI) which provides all counties with access to information on all cases.

III. EMPHASIS ON ADOPTION OVER FAMILY PRESERVATION AND REUNIFICATION

State and local officials interpreted the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) to emphasize adoption as the permanent placement of choice, over efforts to preserve or reunify families. For the first time, the law specifies instances where courts should not make reasonable efforts to reunify families prior to foster care placement. In addition, ASFA requires States to initiate termination of parental rights if a child under ten has been in foster care for 15 of the most recent 22 months. Even the simple renaming of the "Family Preservation and Support" program to "Promoting Safe and Stable Families" is symbolic of the philosophical shift emphasizing adoptions. The following describes how federal funding mechanisms reinforce these ideals, and how two local programs provide preservation and integrated services.

IMPACT OF FEDERAL FUNDING STREAMS ON LOCAL DECISIONMAKING

Four major federal funding sources support child welfare activities: title IV-E, IV-B part 1, IV-B part 2, and the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG). Title IV-E programs are open-ended entitlements that provide "back-end" services such as foster care or adoption assistance. Title IV-B part 1 (discretionary Child Welfare Services Program) and part 2 (capped entitlement Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program) programs support "upfront" preventative services such as family preservation and support services. States may also use their SSBG funds to provide child welfare services.

With capped federal resources to support children living with their families in communities and open-ended foster care and adoption funding, fiscal incentives have historically encouraged States to "dump" children into out-of-home placements. Moreover, because it is difficult to measure the impact of IV-B prevention programs nationwide, little is known on their effectiveness. Although IV-B activities reduce out-of-home placements, and thus, result in IV-E savings, the lack of information has resulted in little support for IV-B programs.

Federal Funding for Child Welfare (\$ in millions, unadjusted for inflation)

Program	Actual FY1985	Actual FY1994	Estimated FY1999
IV-E (Foster Care, Adoption Assistance, ILP)	\$788	\$3,356.1	\$5,121.5
IV-B, part 1 (Child Welfare Services)	\$200	\$294.6	\$292
IV-B, part 2 (Promoting Safe and Stable Families)	NA	\$60	\$275
SSBG (about 25% go to child welfare services)	\$2,725	\$2,800	\$1,909

As the table above shows, IV-E funding levels have dramatically increased, while IV-B and SSBG funding has remained fixed or decreased. Between FY1985 and FY1999, funding for IV-E programs increased from \$788 million to over \$5 billion, while SSBG decreased from \$2.725 billion to an estimated \$1.909 billion. FY1999 funding for IV-B part 1 and part 2 was level at \$292 million and \$275 million respectively.

In response to rising foster care costs, ASFA emphasizes that foster care is a temporary, not permanent placement setting, and looks to adoption as the permanency solution. States are expediting and increasing adoptions in response to the \$20 million in adoption incentives.

While California State and local administrators laud the adoption bonus, they are concerned that federal officials are overlooking the "other" permanency options of preserving and reunifying families. The lack of a single, reliable source of federal funds targeted for upfront, preventive services results in a shortage of these services in California. This shortage is evidenced by long waiting lists at local programs such as those described below.

Furthermore, any federal savings achieved by meeting the desired permanency outcomes and preventing out-of-home placements, cannot be captured and reinvested into the child welfare system. California State administrators, San Francisco and Los Angeles County officials, and local service providers contend that appropriate incentives and investments can better enable the child welfare system to attain the ASFA goals of safety, well-being and permanency. The following is a description of two types of IV-B programs.

THE TRIANGLE PROGRAM: A FAMILY PRESERVATION AND SUPPORT PROGRAM

HHS awarded LA County a five-year grant to test a Family Preservation and Support project in 28 agencies throughout the County. The Triangle Family Preservation Network is one of these agencies serving the South Central Los Angeles area. The goals of Triangle are to assure the safety of children, improve family functioning by building on strengths, and increase self-sufficiency and community involvement.

Triangle offers intensive services to families referred by social workers, schools, churches, or the courts. Once the family caseworker assesses the family's needs, a team comprised of the multidisciplinary staff and the family develops a service plan based on the family's strengths. Core services include: one to four in-home visits per week by the family's caseworker; child risk assessments; specialized visitors targeted to the family's needs (such as housekeeping, personal finance, role-modeling, and parenting; in-home emergency caretakers; counseling; mental health and substance abuse treatment; and self-help groups). Triangle also helps families find appropriate assistance through linkages with other health, education and social service agencies. Linkage services include employment and training, health care, child care, respite care, housing assistance, literacy classes, and legal services. Family case plans can last anywhere from three months to one year.

Because it is difficult to measure the effects of prevention programs, the evaluation focuses on the impact that family preservation and support has had on out-of-home placements. Since the program's inception in 1994 (the demonstration is in its fifth year), preliminary findings show that foster care placements have decreased by 63 percent.

THE FUTURES PROJECT: AN INTEGRATED CHILD WELFARE SERVICES PROGRAM

Taking an integrated approach to early intervention and prevention, the Futures Project in San Mateo County offers a broad range of services through a partnership between the County and the school district. Through the provision of integrated services (also referred to as "wraparound"), the program can promote self-sufficiency, improve the educational success of children, and support the mental and physical health of families. Federal funding for these diverse activities come from Family Preservation and Support, TANF, Food Stamps and Medicaid. County funds are matched with State funds at a 3:1 ratio.

Located on four school sites, the Futures Project serves six schools and is operational in only those communities where there is a long history of collaboration to maximize success. Each site is staffed with a nurse, eligibility worker, mental health counselor, and social worker to provide on-site assistance such as community resource referrals and child risk assessments through the following process.

As **Attachment B** illustrates, clients may self-refer, or teachers, CPS, agency and Futures staff (who also conduct in-class activities such as problem-solving) can refer students and parents to the program. Once Futures staff assess the client's needs, a team comprised of the multidisciplinary staff and the client, develops a strategy for services. The team reconvenes for follow-up meetings accordingly.

The Futures Project was awarded a five-year Family Preservation and Support grant to support the prevention and reunification component of the collaborative program. The County has proposed a demonstration to examine the effects of school-based prevention on foster care caseloads. The evaluation is based on a cost avoidance model using outcome-based measures such as: the number of adoptions, out-of-home placements, and other types of care; the number of first-time and repeated incidents of child abuse and neglect. The Director emphasized that strong political relationships between the collaborating agencies were the root of the program's success.

CULTURAL CONFLICTS

The emphasis on adoptions conflicts with Indian tribal interests which seek to reunify children with relatives in the tribe. For Region IX States that have a large number of tribes, this is a major concern. Regional staff emphasized the importance of considering ASFA as one piece of a larger picture.

IV. CHILD WELFARE WAIVER/DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

Social Security amendments in 1994 authorized ten States to use IV-B and IV-E funds to test new approaches to child welfare service delivery. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 recently expanded that authority to ten additional States in each of the five FYs 1998 through 2002. California was among the first ten States to be granted a child welfare waiver. The State's project is comprised of three components: Extended Voluntary Placement, Intensive Services, and Kinship Performance.

EXTENDED VOLUNTARY PLACEMENT

The first component of the three-part proposal is the Extended Voluntary Placement (EVP) program. Under current law, families outside of the dependency system (in which children are wards of the State) may voluntarily place their children in out-of-home care, usually with relatives, for up to 6 months, at which time courts must decide whether to return the child home or to place the child in foster care. The EVP program would allow counties to extend the judicial determination requirement for voluntary placements from 6 to 12 months, thus keeping these families outside of the dependency system. This project will allow families more time to make permanency decisions, and is also likely to reduce foster care costs and court costs. To determine cost-neutrality, the evaluation will use comparison counties. Also, the EVP project will not exceed 500 cases over the 5 years of the demonstration.

INTENSIVE SERVICES

The second project, the Intensive Services program would permit use of title IV-E funds to test innovative service delivery approaches for at-risk families. Integrated service programs, such as those described in section III, will allow the counties to provide a broad range of individualized services (such as in-home counseling, parenting training, personal finance classes). This project is likely to reduce out-of-home placements and/or divert children in placement to less restrictive, more permanent, family-like settings, and thus, result in IV-E savings. The evaluation will compare randomly assigned experimental and control groups. A determination of cost-neutrality will rely on an analysis of the costs within control groups.

California is one of several States with a child welfare waiver allowing IV-E funds to pay for intensive IV-B preventative and reunification services which reduce out-of-home placements and result in IV-E savings. Such demand for intensive service demonstration projects indicates the need for increased IV-B resources.

KINSHIP CARE

Under current law, kinship caregivers have three options. If they participate in foster care, the State maintains custody of the child, requiring court appearances and monthly child welfare agency involvement. In order to adopt and have full custody, relatives must terminate parental

rights. And finally, relatives can obtain legal guardianship and preserve parental rights, but cannot receive any federal support under this option.

Given that one-third of California's foster children are living with relatives, there is a great interest in providing them with guardianship rights to eliminate the unnecessary court and case management costs. State Administrators and local service providers all echoed the same sentiment: foster children living with relatives unnecessarily burden court and child welfare caseloads. Because relatives generally provide consistent and safe care, children tend to stay longer than in non-relative care. As a result, this population is driving a huge increase in foster care caseloads because overall entries are outpacing exits. The foster care system is an inappropriate fit for children living with relatives.

The third component of the State's demonstration project, the Kinship Performance program provides kinship caregivers of foster children over the age of 13 with guardianship and monthly foster care payments. Providing relatives with guardianship and assistance will reduce court and child welfare management costs, as the children would no longer be wards of the State. These savings are likely to offset the costs of maintenance payments. The evaluation will entail random case assignment to experimental or control groups. A determination of cost-neutrality for will rely on an analysis of the costs within control groups.

Although the State is still in the early implementation stages of all three components of their demonstration project, California State child welfare administrators, local service providers, caseworkers and kinship care providers voiced concern over the limited scope of the kinship care component. At the federal level, there is interest in learning about kinship care, and ASFA encourages kinship care child welfare waivers and requires the Department to submit a report on the topic. While State administrators appreciate this interest, they say it is too little, too late. Kinship care is already prevalent nationwide and is beyond testing through a small-scale demonstration project. In fact, because the Kinship Performance project was limited to foster children above 13 of age in ten counties, the State estimates that the evaluation costs will outweigh the benefits of conducting the demonstration on such a limited basis. They are unsure at this time whether they will be going forward with the project.

V. ROLE OF THE COURTS

The courts play an important role in the child welfare system by providing judicial decision-making and oversight of IV-B and IV-E services. Specifically, the court makes decisions concerning the existence of child abuse or neglect, the termination of parental rights, the placement of children in State custody, and whether reasonable efforts have been made to prevent removal of children from their homes.

In addition, the recently enacted ASFA increases the workload in juvenile and family courts. The legislation requires that child safety be the highest priority when making service provision, placement, and permanency planning decisions for children. The law, for the first time, also specifies instances when States are not required to make efforts to keep children with their parents if doing so places the child's safety in jeopardy. ASFA has resulted in: (1) tighter deadlines for judicial hearings and decisions, (2) increased caseloads, and (3) insufficient training in child welfare issues for judges, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), guardians ad litem, and attorneys; and, delays in making the determinations required by the legislation.

In FY 1998, \$10 million of the Family Preservation and Support program was set-aside for the Court Improvement Project. This project provides State courts with resources to collaborate with the other organizations and individuals responsible for promoting and protecting the well-being of children and families (for example, State child welfare agencies, Court Appointed Special Advocates, guardians ad litem, citizen reviewers, and attorneys) in reviewing laws and procedures designed to protect to families and children. State courts can design assessment tools that identify ineffective laws and procedures, and implement State reforms.

THE JUDICIAL COUNCIL OF CALIFORNIA

The Judicial Council of California is the administrative office for the State's supreme court and is responsible for developing the State's Court Improvement Project assessment report and its implementation plan. The two-year assessment phase included a broad-based review of laws, procedures, and practices applicable to juvenile court operations to assess whether courts fulfilled their legal obligations to the children and families who appear in juvenile court. The report examines four areas for improving California's handling of juvenile court dependency cases: (1) improved management of court hearings, (2) valuing juvenile court judges, (3) effective, efficient, and well-trained advocates for parties, and (4) judicial leadership in the community.

The Council used the assessment report to develop 27 specific Court Improvement Project recommendations. The recommendations include:

- Local juvenile courts should adopt case calendaring techniques that reduce waiting time for hearings.
- Local juvenile courts should actively monitor the timeliness and quality of reports to the court. Judicial officers should hold parties accountable for late and incomplete reports.

- Local juvenile courts should closely monitor the granting of continuances and only grant continuance for good cause.
- All judges hearing dependency cases should be familiar with the *Resource Guidelines*, which contain very specific suggestions for conducting thorough hearings in dependency actions, endorsed by the American Bar Association and Conference of Chief Justices.
- Juvenile dependency courts should utilize alternative dispute resolution techniques such as mediation and family group conferences.
- A single judicial officer should hear all phases of a dependency case. Judicial officers should also serve a minimum of three years.
- The Judicial Council should identify and correct financial disincentives to permanency planning and reunification.
- The Judicial Council should seek adequate funding to ensure training for counsel in dependency cases.
- The use of Court Appointed Special Advocate programs (CASA) should be expanded. Juvenile courts should continue to seek adequate funding. (Notably, in response to this recommendation, State legislation was proposed to triple funding levels for the CASA programs. Approval is pending in the legislature.)

Completed phases of implementation include: the distribution of the report, recommendations and *Resource Guidelines*; the development of model local rules, protocols, forms and guidelines; an annual conference to provide technical assistance in local action plans; on-site assistance and monitoring; and, training for attorneys, advocates and judicial officers.

VI. DATA REPORTING AND CASE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Since 1994, States have been required to participate in a mandatory data collection system known as the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). Under AFCARS, States are required to collect case-specific data on all children for whom they have custody, regardless of IV-E eligibility. Data elements include length of foster care stay, the number of children entering and exiting foster care, the most recent case plan for foster children, current placement of foster care exits (pre-adoptive home, foster-relative, foster non-relative, group home, institution, or runaway). Although implementation has been slow, nearly all States are now reporting AFCARS data.

States can also receive an enhanced federal match if they develop a Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) which incorporates AFCARS data points, but is also an automated case management system. To date, 46 States were implementing SACWIS systems.

As part of the Governor's Adoption Initiative, California has opted to develop a SACWIS system which, after three years of implementation, is just beginning operation at the county level. Prior to implementation, there was no way to track children across the 58 California counties. Although some counties have had difficulties in making the transition (those who chose to add the system onto existing systems, rather than implement dedicated systems), all believe that the system will result in improved case management, and thus, better outcomes for children. The State SACWIS system is used to: meet AFCARS requirements; collect and manage information on the delivery of child welfare services; collect and manage IV-E eligibility information; monitor case plan development; record court reports; provide inter-county electronic data exchange; and meet confidentiality requirements.

The paperless case management system allows all the social workers who work on a single case to maintain a comprehensive record in one place. In addition to the thousands of field workers now using SACWIS, caseworkers stationed in courts and hotline centers can access cases directly and input court reports and child abuse incidents. This system prevents field workers from having to spend all day waiting for court appearances and coordinating with child protection workers. Ultimately, automated case management allows caseworkers to spend their time more efficiently, resulting in better outcomes for children.

By the end of the State fiscal year 2000, the State Department of Social Services will submit a report to the Governor on the impact of the system on the child welfare systems. The State is looking at how SACWIS will influence case management practice and policy.

Article B

[Return to Headlines](#)**THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.**Ruby
4/9**Politics & People:
Abused Kids Get Squeezed by the Ideologues
By Albert R. Hunt**

02/27/1997

The Wall Street Journal

Page A17

(Copyright (c) 1997, Dow Jones & Company, Inc.)

Today, like each day, five kids in America will be brutally murdered by their parents. Both the political left and the right are unwittingly aiding this outrage in the guise of promoting family values.

The left's culpability goes back to the **Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act** of 1980, which makes it very difficult to take abused and neglected **children** away from their biological parents. The political right would make this intolerable situation even worse with one of its newest and hottest priorities: the "parental-rights" movement.

To put it in understandably stark terms, these movements -- which both fail to make any distinction between family rights and protection of innocent **children** -- are totally in line with a California judge's recent abominable decision to give O.J. Simpson custody of his **children**.

"The combined effect of the existing **child** welfare laws and the parental-rights movement is to ensure that people like O.J. Simpson get full custody," says Richard Gelles, director of the Family Violence Research Program at the University of Rhode Island and author of "The Book of David," about a 15-month-old boy who was murdered by his mother, a repeated abuser.

What really infuriates Mr. Gelles is that the jockeying for political advantage on the family values issue distracts from the real need for major reforms to help battered **children**. These would be expensive at a time when new spending is not in vogue, and controversial -- no matter how the issue is framed, the bottom line is that the states need to play a more active role in deciding the fate of abused **children**.

This can't be done without changing the 1980 legislation, whose well-intended premise is that if families stay together they will flourish together. States were directed to make "reasonable efforts" to keep and reunite **children** with their biological parents.

Carol Bevan, who has written extensively on **adoption** and foster care, says this measure has been a "dismal failure," resulting in longer stays in foster care and fewer adoptions. With more efforts to reunite **kids** with abusive parents, Mr. Gelles and others have documented case after case of repeated abuse ending in permanent injury or death. Rather than viewing these **child** abusers as dangerous or even psychotic, he notes, too often they are treated as merely "being at one end of a continuum of parenting."

This would seem to be an easy target for conservatives -- another government program with unintended dire consequences. Instead, the political right, cheered on by the Christian Coalition, focuses more on pushing state and federal parental-rights initiatives.

The real purpose of these efforts, which are being introduced in more than two dozen states and in Congress, is to advance the right's assault on public schools. Parents would be able to prevent their **kids** from learning everything from sex education to evolution to Shakespeare.

That is bad enough. But the even more ominous effect, a number of family law specialists have warned, would be to make it harder to take action against abusive parents and would therefore set back efforts to increase adoptions out of the foster-care system.

Central to any effort to alleviate the plight of abused **children** in America is to facilitate more adoptions. (My wife and I have three **children**, one of whom is adopted.) Last year there were an estimated half-million **children** in foster care; only 20,000 were adopted. Yet the demand for **adoption** in America is every bit as great as the supply.



Although conservatives are loath to give any credit, Bill and **Hillary Clinton** deserve high marks on **adoption**. The president was a forceful advocate last year of legislation easing restrictions on transracial **adoption** and enacting an **adoption** tax credit. Mrs. **Clinton**, whom conservatives derided several years ago for her sensible suggestion that under certain circumstances **children** ought to have greater legal rights to separate from their parents, has been an eloquent champion of more adoptions in America.

This month the administration proposed giving states a bonus for increasing adoptions, especially for special-needs **kids**, and shortening the waiting period for a court hearing after a **child** enters the foster-care system. In the House today, following discussions with the White House, Democratic Rep. Barbara Kennelly and Republican Rep. Dave

Camp will introduce a similar measure, which also would modify the "reasonable efforts" provision to make it somewhat easier to take **kids** from abusive parents.

Mr. Gelles, while wholeheartedly supportive of vastly increased emphasis on **adoption**, thinks more radical steps must be taken, too. Social welfare workers are simply ill-equipped to investigate the thousands of incidents of repeated abuse and neglect; this ought to be done by police. "These are criminal acts and it involves the protection of life," he argues.

Then, starting with the 1980 legislation, laws on both the federal and state levels should be modified to better enhance the rights and protection of **children**; parental responsibilities should be emphasized as much as parental rights. States that protect **children** well ought to get federal rewards. This would make it easier for judges to take **kids** from unfit parents.

Mr. Gelles also argues that considerably more resources have to be expended. Since no one is confident of all the answers, there could be four or five big experimental efforts to gauge better what might work. One answer for abused **kids** who can't be adopted may be what used to be called "orphanages" -- now usually referred to as "congregate care facilities." House Speaker Newt Gingrich was assailed two years ago for suggesting this, but he was absolutely right, Mr. Gelles says. Today's orphanages don't bear any resemblance to the Dickensian images of "Oliver Twist."

"Congregate care facilities such as Boys' Town in Nebraska and the Milton Hershey School in Pennsylvania are plausible and cost-effective placements for abused and battered **children**," he says. But they are costly; the average annual per- **child** cost runs around \$35,000.

Equally important is for the political right and left to stop doing harm under the guise of promoting family values, what Samuel Johnson would today call the "last refuge of scoundrels."

The agenda Mr. Gelles outlines will produce flak from both sides of the ideological spectrum. Conservatives will protest about giving the state too much power. Liberals will complain this is disproportionately aimed at minorities; more than 60% of **children** in foster care are African-American or Hispanic.

Both are right. But the alternative is simply unacceptable: Consider a real case in Washington, D.C., involving a five-year-old boy whose mother four years ago suffocated his younger sister when the infant wouldn't stop crying. The mother, who has had four **children** by four men, had repeatedly violated the law. Yet even today, four years after she murdered her **child**, the fate of her five-year-old son remains uncertain.

APR. -29' 99 (THU) 16:40

Dow Jones Interactive Publications Library

<http://nrstg2w.djnr.com/cgi-bin/DJInterac...&Highlight=on&DocType=TextOnly&View=View>

Display as

Full Article

[Return to Headlines](#)[Format for Printing](#)

Copyright © 1999 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Adoption going on line

U.S. government Web site to list kids nationwide by 2001

By Marilyn Elias
USA TODAY

The federal government Monday announced plans to create a Web site with photos and descriptions of children awaiting adoption through public agencies across the nation.

About 8,000 youngsters need homes now. That number could double or triple by 2001, when the site is expected to be up, says Carol Williams of the Children's Bureau at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

President Clinton in November asked HHS for a plan to expand use of the Internet to find adoptive homes.

The HHS report, submitted Monday, estimates the Web site will cost \$1.5 million to set up, then \$1.25 million per year to run. The funds will come from adoption-related programs already in the budget, with private-sector contributions expected.

States won't be legally required to list on the federal site, the report says, but a recent national survey suggests that many states regard the Internet as a good recruitment tool.

"The president supports the use of the Net in this way, and we're pleased to be making progress," says Bruce Reed, domestic policy adviser to Clinton. No White House approval is needed to get the plan moving, Reed says.

The number of U.S. children free for adoption is expected to soar in the next few years, primarily because of a 1997 federal law that shortens the length of time kids can remain in foster care before plans are made for a permanent home.

"A national Web site that could include all youngsters available in public adoptions will give these kids a much greater pool of families to draw from," says Joe Kroll of the North American Council on Adoptable Children, an advocacy support group.

Still, "it's not going to make children who are not there suddenly available," Williams says.

The "vast majority" of youngsters photographed and described will be over 3 years old, she says. Many will have handicaps — physical, intellectual or emotional. Some will be part of sibling groups to be adopted together. A significant number will be racial minorities, Williams says.

A pilot Internet adoption site called FACES (go to www.adopt.org and click on photo listings) has been offered by the National Adoption Center in Philadelphia since October 1995. The site opened with listings and photos of 40 children; now there are 1,600, executive director Carolyn Johnson says.

Interest has accelerated, she says. In March, 1,315 of the children listed drew e-mail inquiries from 380 potential families.

About 37 states have Internet adoption sites, but some are very limited.

Prospective parents always visit youngsters in person before adopting, Johnson says. Home studies and approval are required, just as they are in ordinary adoptions.

Many of the 76 adopted so far off the Philadelphia site "weren't likely to have ever found homes," Johnson says. "The Internet is the best tool we have."