STABILITY AS A RIGHT: STRENGTHENING FOSTER CARE THROUGH TRAUMA-INFORMED POLICY AND APPROPRIATE PLACEMENT PRACTICES

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RECOMMENDATION SUMMARY

In order to improve foster placement stability, Congress should 1) mandate comprehensive trauma-informed training and continuing education for foster care providers, 2) implement clinical oversight for foster family, youth matches, and placement removals, and 3) leverage technology to improve placement practices.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The foster care system struggles to provide the stability necessary for vulnerable youth to thrive. A significant barrier to achieving permanency—a permanent, stable relationship with a family—is the lack of consistent federal regulations for foster placement stability. This inconsistency leads to frequent moves that disrupt a child's psychological and educational development. To address this issue, targeted reforms are needed, including mandatory trauma-informed training for all foster care providers, clinical oversight of placements and removals, and the use of technology to improve matching and enable real-time communication across agencies.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

I entered foster care in search of the stability I believed it would offer – a chance to complete my high school education and build a foundation for my future. Ironically, by the time I reached high school, I had already attended more than ten schools. I craved consistency long before I even understood what that truly meant. Yet even in care, I changed schools three more times and moved between seven different foster homes in less than three years. In many ways, I went from one unstable situation to another, through no fault of my own. This experience highlighted a deeper issue through a fundamental gap in knowledge and training among the adults who wielded significant influence over the lives of foster youth, including caseworkers and foster families. Education is the most powerful tool one can possess, and equipping professionals with the necessary trauma raining will benefit young people like me. Recognizing and addressing these educational gaps for child welfare professionals is the first step toward providing foster youth with the stability they desperately need and rightfully deserve.

THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Placement stability is one of the most critical yet often overlooked challenges in the foster care system. It refers to a child's ability to remain in the same home over time with consistent caregivers who can meet their physical, emotional, and developmental needs. However, the absence of uniform federal regulations has led to inconsistent practices across states, causing many children to experience frequent placement changes. These disruptions often result in repeated trauma, emotional instability, and long-term psychological effects, such as attachment disorders and difficulty trusting others. Placement instability also hinders academic achievement and the ability to form lasting relationships, leaving many children without a sense of permanency or belonging and making it difficult to envision a stable future (Children's Bureau, 2020; Pecora et al., 2005).

Over ⅓ of foster children experience more than two placements each year, with some states reporting rates as high as 51%.

NATIONAL OVERALL

Current federal and state laws do not adequately address the need for placement stability in foster care. While acts like the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) and the Fostering Connections Act promote permanency, they lack clear requirements to limit placement moves or to standardize caregiver training, trauma-informed care, and child–family matching. As a result, states vary widely in how they manage placements, often responding to crises rather than preventing them. Research shows that children with stable placements are twice as likely to perform well academically and are more likely to graduate from high school and avoid involvement with the juvenile justice system (Webb et al., 2010).

Several states have introduced promising strategies to improve placement stability in foster care, offering valuable models for broader reform. In Oregon, the Foster Youth Connection program emphasizes comprehensive assessments of foster homes, targeted training for foster parents, and consistent support services tailored to each child's needs. These efforts have contributed to a notable reduction in placement disruptions: as of September 30, 2021, 58.3% of children in care had two or fewer placements, reflecting the state's focus on stability (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2021). Oregon's approach, grounded in proactive training and structured follow-up, demonstrates how data-informed practices can improve outcomes. Similarly, New Jersey implemented a matching tool within its Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), aligning children's needs with caregiver characteristics. Between 2009 and 2016, this innovation helped reduce congregate care placements by 45%, suggesting that more children were placed in family-based settings better suited to their needs, an indicator of stronger alignment and greater placement stability.

THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

While this reduction is a step in the right direction, uniform federal regulations are necessary to prevent the inconsistent practices across states that continue to result in frequent placement changes for foster youth. For example, behavioral challenges, often stemming from trauma, are a leading cause of placement disruptions (Rubin et al., 2007). These tools should also support cross-agency communication and coordination, prioritizing placements that keep foster youth near their support systems and the communities where they entered care. According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway, effective data systems are essential for guiding child welfare decision-making and improving practice. They help agencies share information and reduce instances where children are placed in less suitable in-house options due to lack of coordination between agencies (Children Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve foster placement stability, Congress should:

- **Mandate Comprehensive Trauma-Informed Training and Continuing Education for Foster Care Providers:** Require all foster care providers to complete standardized, trauma-informed training focused on child development, the effects of trauma, and strategies for stable caregiving. Ongoing education should be mandated to ensure providers remain informed about best practices.

- **Implement Clinical Oversight for Foster Family and Youth Matches and Placements Removals:** Require clinical oversight in the placement matching and removal process, using licensed mental health professionals to assess both the child's needs and the foster family's caregiving capacity. This structured approach promotes compatibility and stability using trauma screenings and readiness assessments. If a foster family requests removal of a child, a clinical review should determine whether removal is necessary or if targeted support and intervention could stabilize the placement.

- **Leverage Technology to Improve Placement Practices:** Implement data-driven tools and algorithms that match youth with families based on compatibility rather than availability, leading to more stable and supportive placements. More importantly, these tools should facilitate real-time communication between agencies about open beds and child needs, helping prevent unsuitable or emergency placements driven by availability alone.