

## PREVENTING SIBLING SEPARATION

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sibling separation remains a prevalent issue in the U.S. foster care system, with an estimated 53% to 80% of siblings placed apart despite federal mandates encouraging joint placement or visitation (Griffin, 2023). Research shows that maintaining sibling relationships significantly improves children’s mental health, academic performance, placement stability, and overall permanency, while separation increases risks of anxiety, depression, and developmental challenges (Shafi et al, 2023). To address this gap, this proposal recommends the passage of the Protecting Sibling Relationships in Foster Care Act (H.R. 8566). The program would identify successful foster home characteristics, examine systemic barriers such as licensing requirements that limit sibling co-placement and evaluate outcomes for siblings placed together. Additionally, it would authorize greater flexibility in foster parent licensing standards. These recommendations aim to prioritize sibling unity as a core component of child well-being and permanency.

### PERSONAL REFLECTION

My older brother entered the foster care system and was adopted before my sister and I were ever placed in foster care. Even though the community-based care agency knew we existed, we learned there was no meaningful effort to bring us together. It is hard not to wonder how different our lives could have been if someone had made that a priority, if we had been given the chance to grow up side-by-side instead of as strangers.

We lost more than just time. We lost shared memories, everyday moments, and the comfort of having each other during one of the most difficult periods of our lives. Because of that separation, my brother missed out on a bond that could have supported his emotional growth, sense of identity, and stability. That absence is not just a policy failure; it’s a deeply personal loss that highlights why keeping siblings together should never be an afterthought.

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## THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

The separation of siblings can have significant consequences for children’s developmental growth and overall well-being. Foster youth often remember their entry into care as a time of worry, guilt, confusion, and identity loss (Shafi et al., 2023). Therefore, having a sibling can make the process of entering the foster care system seem less daunting. Research from the Children’s Bureau has shown that youth who experience sibling separation are more likely to exhibit internalizing behaviors, including anxiety and depression (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). Siblings also tend to experience fewer placement changes individually if placed together due to better behavior (Shafi et al., 2023). Furthermore, children who are placed with their siblings tend to experience improved mental health outcomes and demonstrate stronger academic performance (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). Siblings who are placed together also have a better chance of adjustment to their new placement, to their new placement and foster parents (Shafi et al., 2023). Keeping siblings together will strengthen their overall emotional stability, allowing them to better cope with the challenges of foster care.

Although the emotional impact of sibling separation remains a critical consideration, increasing the availability of foster homes for large sibling groups may require targeted changes to the licensing process. One significant barrier to keeping siblings together in foster care is the complexity and rigidity of foster parent licensure. When foster homes are not licensed to accommodate larger groups of children, sibling groups are often separated and placed into multiple households. As noted by Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Yellowstone County, “if a home is not licensed for large groups of children, sibling groups may end up being split into small numbers and divided among several foster homes” (CASA of Yellowstone County, n.d.). Kinship caregivers face similar barriers, many of which have been addressed through increased flexibility in licensure standards. Applying similar flexibility to licensing standards for larger sibling groups could also be beneficial. A new federal rule from the Administration for Children and Families now allows Title IV-E agencies to create separate licensing or approval standards for kinship caregivers (Chapin Hall, 2025). This policy shift highlights an opportunity to rethink how licensing standards are structured more broadly. Aligning foster care licensing more closely with federal baseline requirements, particularly those related to background checks, while granting agencies greater discretion to modify or waive less critical criteria, could reduce barriers for prospective foster parents. Such adjustments may be especially impactful for those willing to care for larger sibling groups. By revising licensing standards in this way, child welfare systems could improve placement stability and increase permanency outcomes for siblings in care. Overall, implementing more flexible and responsive licensing approaches has the potential to expand the pool of foster homes able to care for sibling groups and better meet the needs of youth in foster care.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to preserve sibling relationships, Congress should:

- **Pass the Protecting Siblings in Foster Care Act (H.R.8566) reintroduced on April 29, 2026.** As currently written, this legislation would provide \$10 million in federal funding over five years to create a competitive pilot grant program administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The program would support specialized foster care approaches for large sibling groups, siblings with significant age differences, and children with complex needs. Up to five grants could be awarded to eligible state, tribal, local, faith-based, and nonprofit organizations to help develop or expand programs focused on keeping siblings placed together and maintaining those relationships while in foster care. Grant recipients would also be required to track and report placement data and outcomes to help guide future child welfare policies and practices at the federal and state levels.
- **Direct the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as part of the implementation of the Protecting Siblings in Foster Care Act, to evaluate and address licensing and placement barriers that prevent foster families from accepting and maintaining large sibling groups.** This could include a structured review of foster parent licensure requirements, placement standards, and approval processes that may accidentally limit capacity for sibling group placements. HHS should require participating agencies to assess how licensing flexibilities and regulatory adjustments affect recruitment, retention, and placement stability for foster families willing to care for larger sibling groups. The goal would be to identify evidence-based changes that improve the ability of foster care systems to keep siblings together and strengthen placement stability and permanency outcomes.