

ENHANCING REUNIFICATION THROUGH MULTIDISCIPLINARY LEGAL REPRESENTATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report identifies systemic gaps in the U.S. child welfare system that delay reunification and prolong foster care placements. Although reunification is a federal priority, many parents lack legal representation and coordinated support to navigate case requirements, resulting in extended and often avoidable family separation. Federal law does not guarantee parents access to counsel, requiring only that states inform them of available attorneys. Parents also lack consistent access to multidisciplinary supports, including social work, mental health, and advocacy services that address underlying needs. These barriers are compounded by strict timelines, service delays, poverty-related constraints, and uneven access to resources. This report recommends expanding access to legal representation and strengthening family support systems by requiring or incentivizing counsel at all stages, authorizing Title IV-E reimbursement for legal services, and expanding Title IV-B to support multidisciplinary legal teams and concrete services. These reforms are intended to reduce time in foster care and improve reunification outcomes.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

I am deeply passionate about this issue because too many children spend extended time in the foster care system waiting for reunification while their parents navigate complex and often ineffective requirements. Parents are frequently forced to jump through hoops, face systemic barriers, and participate in services that fail to address the root causes of their involvement with child welfare or their family's unique needs. My siblings and I spent two and a half years in foster care, despite my father's immediate and unwavering commitment to reunification. There were no substantiated allegations against him, yet we were not returned home to his care until the system had exhausted other placement options. From the beginning, he faced bias from the family case manager, court scheduling that ultimately cost him his job, and the financial strain of traveling from out of state for frequent hearings. He had no legal representation, no advocate, and no support system to guide him through the process. Meanwhile, my mother was court-mandated into a substance use treatment facility, but the support she received did not address the full scope of her barriers to reunification.

Although we were ultimately reunited with our father, I am left questioning what delayed that outcome, why he did not receive meaningful support or legal representation, and how the system can be reformed to prevent similar

PERSONAL REFLECTION (CONTINUED)

experiences for other families. I am committed to identifying and advancing solutions that ensure families receive the support they need to reunify safely and efficiently. Children deserve confidence that their parents are supported on a clear path toward reunification, and parents deserve access to multidisciplinary teams that provide guidance, advocacy, and representation throughout the process. With the right support, parents can address underlying challenges, remain actively involved in their children's lives, and be fully considered as permanency options. Without these interventions, barriers compound, delaying or even preventing reunification. Systemic gaps should not result in prolonged trauma for children. Child welfare systems must instead prioritize intentional, comprehensive support that strengthens families and promotes timely reunification.



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THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW

Providing multidisciplinary legal representation to parents is key to improving family reunification outcomes. This model is strongly supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Children's Bureau, which emphasize the importance of high-quality legal representation in child welfare cases and highlight multidisciplinary teams as a means to prevent unnecessary foster care placement. They further encourage jurisdictions to ensure high-quality legal representation for all parties at all stages of child welfare proceedings (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, 2017).

Currently, the Supporting America's Children and Families Act of 2025 requires states to inform parents about available independent legal representation but does not require that counsel be provided or funded (Children's Bureau, 2025). It also does not require notification of multidisciplinary representation, leaving families without access to coordinated legal and wraparound services unless they can independently secure them. As a result, access to legal representation and supportive services varies widely, and many parents navigate complex systems without adequate guidance, undermining timely reunification and prolonging time to permanency. Multidisciplinary legal models that integrate attorneys, social workers, and parent advocates are widely recognized as a best-practice approach in preventive legal advocacy yet remain limited to select jurisdictions and pilot programs rather than serving as a national standard (Casey Family Programs, 2024). Expanding both legal and multidisciplinary representation has been identified as a key mechanism for improving reunification outcomes (Family Justice Initiative, n.d.).

THE PROBLEM & CURRENT LAW (CONTINUED)

Research consistently shows that legal representation alone is insufficient to ensure timely reunification, as families require coordinated, multidisciplinary services to address the complex drivers of system involvement. Successful reunification depends on integrated support across legal, child welfare, and community systems, including access to mental health care, housing assistance, and social services (Bai et al., 2023). Families frequently face overlapping barriers such as poverty, mental health needs, substance use, and housing instability, which are difficult to resolve in isolation (Bai et al., 2023; Urban Institute, n.d.).

However, current service systems are fragmented and under-resourced. “Reasonable efforts” requirements are inconsistently implemented, often underfunded, and poorly aligned with families’ needs, particularly in addressing structural poverty (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). These challenges are compounded by high caseloads, limited resources, and insufficient training for caseworkers. Together, these conditions contribute to delayed or insufficient intervention, prolonging foster care stays and increasing the likelihood of termination and adoption rather than family preservation. These findings consistently demonstrate that intersecting barriers, including substance use, mental health needs, housing instability, and poverty, are best addressed through early, comprehensive multidisciplinary intervention (Bai et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020), underscoring the need for integrated legal and social service teams as a core component of child welfare reform.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to enhance reunification efforts for children and youth in foster care, Congress should:

- **Enact federal legislation requiring states to provide legal representation to parents when their children are at risk of removal, throughout all child welfare proceedings, and at termination proceedings.** To ensure consistent implementation across states, Congress should amend Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to explicitly define legal representation for parents and children as a mandatory, federally reimbursable child welfare service, rather than an optional administrative cost, thereby establishing stable and uniform funding for access to counsel nationwide.
- **Amend Title IV-B of the Social Security Act to include funding for state-run multidisciplinary legal teams.** These teams should include attorneys, parent advocates, and social workers or case coordinators, integrating legal representation with social services and advocacy supports. Congress can further incentivize adoption by creating targeted grant programs, establishing a dedicated funding stream, and increasing the federal match rate for legal and multidisciplinary representation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS (CONTINUED)

- **Congress should allow states to use Title IV-B funds for concrete, family support services such as housing assistance, transportation, visitation support, treatment access, and other reunification-related services, separate from multidisciplinary legal team funding.** These supports will fill gaps that delay reunification, promote parental engagement, and reduce barriers to timely permanency.