

Grassley Prepared Remarks
Fostering Conversations: Foster Care Reform
Junior League of Cedar Rapids
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Thank you for the kind introduction, Kari. And thank you all for inviting me to be with you.

At the start, I want to congratulate and thank all of you for convening tonight.

The effort from all of you -- The Junior League, foster parents, and foster youth, and youth advocates -- is needed and welcome.

As long as I've worked on child welfare issues, there's been a critical shortage of initiatives to improve things for the kids who age out of the system.

About 29,000 young people "age out" of foster care each year without permanent families.

These young people face problems with school attendance and performance, substance abuse, financial literacy, teen pregnancy, homelessness, and juvenile delinquency.

Policy improvements are helping slowly but surely.

The *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008*, which I helped to enact, has a section on older foster youth.

The law gave states an option to extend support for youth remaining in care to age 21, provided the kids are in school, working, or otherwise preparing for work.

The law requires each state to have a procedure that ensures every child leaving foster care has a transition plan created on his or her behalf.

These kinds of improvements are meant to curb the very real problem of kids' turning 18 and leaving the foster care system with their belongings in a trash bag and nowhere to go.

Yet for all of the policy improvements, they won't do any good without real people to make them work with care and common sense.

The best-intended policies still need a couple who welcomes an older kid into their home or a community leader, like those of you, who gets to know a teen-ager and sticks with him until he succeeds.

As local residents, you know what works here and what resources are available.

Is there a high school with extra tutoring that might be right for a youth who's had to change schools a dozen times because of foster placements?

Are there mentoring programs that match professionals with kids to provide role models?

Is there a church youth group or Habitat for Humanity chapter that offers opportunities for kids to explore interests through volunteering?

You're uniquely positioned to match needs with solutions.

From my experience, the first and most important step toward success is exactly what you're doing -- to involve the foster youth and really listen to them.

That sounds like such basic common sense that you wouldn't think it would be necessary but it doesn't always happen like clockwork.

As a result, you might get some well-meaning policies that aren't informed.

When Senator Mary Landrieu and I formed the Senate Caucus on Foster Youth in 2009, we wanted to make sure the young people affected by the policy were informing the policy.

A lot of caucuses are formed to raise awareness for a cause, and that's fine, but this caucus is a little different.

It's meant to give a voice to young people who don't have K Street lobbyists to advocate for them.

With those goals in mind, the caucus sponsored a series of working sessions with the goal of assembling options for the next steps in child welfare reform.

To an unprecedented degree, the caucus has engaged current and former foster youth in these working sessions.

Last October, the caucus released a document called the "Call to Action."

It's a set of policy options to build on successful policy improving the lives of youth in foster care.

Up front, the document names the young people who told us of their experiences and gave us their views on what changes would help the next generation.

The document includes long direct quotes from these current and former foster youth with their personal stories.

Their experiences give insight into how the policies can get instituted without full regard for the personal cost.

One young woman wrote of feeling separated from the community in a group home and lacking individual possessions or the privacy to read her mail.

Another young woman wrote of being separated abruptly from her four younger brothers without any way to stay in touch with them.

Maybe the system kept these young women safe, fed and clothed but it didn't do enough for their quality of life or set them up for future success.

To the extent public policy can address these issues, states and local communities should have the flexibility to implement what works locally.

And hearing directly from the kids and foster parents is the key toward establishing what works in the community.

Representative democracy is a two-way street.

My part is representing you as your senator, and your part is conveying your views and concerns and questions to me.

Now I'll stop and let you do your part.

Before I do, I want to thank all of you again for your diligence and your service.