



KIDS ARE WAITING
Fix Foster Care Now

May 16, 2008

The Honorable Charles Grassley
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Finance
United States Senate
219 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Grassley,

On behalf of the *Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now* campaign, sponsored by The Pew Charitable Trusts, I am writing to express our enthusiastic support for the Improved Adoption Incentives and Relative Guardianship Support Act of 2008.

This May, approximately 4,245 foster children across the nation will be adopted. Unfortunately, 127,000 remain in the system, still waiting to be adopted into safe, permanent families. Your proposal would promote adoption and other forms of permanency for children in foster care in three important ways:

- Improving the Adoption Incentive program: Created by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, the federal Adoption Incentives program has been an important contributor to the increase in adoptions from foster care by rewarding states that continued to better their adoption numbers each year. Scheduled to expire in September 2008, it is critically important for Congress to reauthorize the program in the near future. In 1997, there were 31,000 adoptions from foster care nationwide. A year after the program was created, that number grew to nearly 47,000 adoptions. In 2006, nearly 51,000 children were adopted from our nation's foster care system. The federal government authorizes approximately \$43 million for the program each year, but because of the structure of earning the incentives, just 19 states were able to claim bonuses in 2006 for just over \$7 million. Your proposal would implement a more efficient incentive program and reward states for all foster care adoptions that exceed the number achieved in 2007. It also would maintain incentives to states for achieving adoptions of older children and children with special needs and extend the requirement for states to reinvest incentive payments back into their child welfare systems.
- Promoting adoptions of children with special needs: Also created by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, federal adoption assistance is offered to some special needs children when they are adopted from foster care. Currently, adoption assistance is available only when the special needs children come from birth families who were poor enough to have qualified for welfare benefits under income eligibility standards of 1996, or the child meets the disability and income standards of the Supplemental Security



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Income (SSI) program, which requires that the child have a significant disability and be low income. Your proposal would help promote the adoption of foster children with special needs by removing the requirement that an income eligibility determination be made, making all children in foster care who meet the definition of "special needs" eligible for critically important federal adoption assistance.

- Creating a state option to support legal relative guardians: Also in the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, Congress explicitly recognized reunification with birth parents, adoption and legal guardianship as appropriate permanency options for children, however, unlike adoption, guardianship is not federally supported. Your proposal would build on the success of federal waivers and best practices in the field by allowing federally supported guardianships to help more children leave foster care safely and for good. Nearly a quarter of the 500,000 children in the nation's foster care system are living with relatives. Some of these children will be reunited with their parents, while others may be adopted. For some children, however, neither reunification nor adoption is an option, and they remain in the system far longer than is needed. With federal support, nearly 15,000 children could leave foster care today to join permanent families.

The *Kids Are Waiting* campaign applauds your leadership in sponsoring important legislation to support permanency for children in foster care. We are pleased to endorse the Improved Adoption Incentives and Relative Guardianship Support Act of 2008 and look forward to advocating for its passage. It would be a significant step forward in reforming federal policies to ensure safety, permanence, and well-being for our nation's most vulnerable children.

Sincerely,

Hope A. Cooper
Project Director