

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

March 30, 2022

The Honorable Jennifer Cannistra
Acting Assistant Secretary
Administration for Children and Families
US Department of Health and Human Services
330 C Street SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Acting Assistant Secretary Cannistra,

We write to request the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to expedite the new reporting requirements for the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). In addition, we ask that the new information be collated and released as soon as possible. Children in the foster care system remain some of the most vulnerable to Adverse Childhood Experiences such as neglect and abuse as well as human trafficking and other forms of exploitation, and youth who runaway are at unique risk. By expediting the implementation of the new AFCARS data and therefore the collation and distribution of data, lawmakers and child welfare providers will be able to better respond to and care for foster youth.

In 2020, there were a total of 407,493 children in foster care. Of that population, about 1 percent or 4,831 children were designated as “runaway”. Furthermore, these data only capture episodes of “runaway” at the end of the reporting period and does not include episodes during the year itself. A report by RTI International notes, “sources that look at data over longer periods of time...suggest the prevalence of runaway episodes is much higher”. The 2020 AFCARS report also shows of the 224,396 children exiting foster care that year, 528 were designated as “runaway”. AFCARS portrays an incomplete picture of the child welfare system’s record keeping on missing foster youth and perhaps reveals how the shortcomings on accurate data collection can lead to misunderstandings of the system and where attention should be directed. Thankfully, there is some positive change on the horizon for data collection.

Through a Final Rule, ACF will require state child welfare agencies to restructure their reporting of foster youth by October 1, 2022. Under the new rule states are still required to provide data twice a year, but the data they provide must include all the placement settings that a child is in across their stay in foster care. In addition, the new regulation introduces a new category “whereabouts unknown” that is in addition to “runaway”. This will hopefully provide a more accurate depiction of “runaway” foster youth and how care providers and child welfare agencies can respond.

We are glad to see this change in data collection of foster youth experiences, and we strongly suggest you accelerate the update as quickly as you can to the extent possible and relay the new

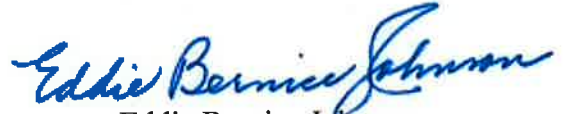
data to Congress once the system is up and running. Our children are our future, our shared interest, and we have an obligation to provide them the best chance possible to exact their full potential.

We look forward to your response, and thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John Cornyn". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping "J" and a cursive "Cornyn".

John Cornyn
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Eddie Bernice Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Eddie Bernice Johnson
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Debbie Stabenow". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tony Gonzalez". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tony Gonzalez
Member of Congress

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chuck Grassley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chuck Grassley
United States Senator