**Executive Order on Strengthening the Child Welfare System for America's Children**

**The goal of our child welfare system**

Our country’s child welfare system is responsible for promoting child and family well-being, ensuring child safety, and achieving permanency of a forever family for children. All three outcomes are critical in ensuring children thrive. To achieve these outcomes, our system is charged with strengthening families by supporting community-based prevention efforts that protect children from abuse and neglect; implementing effective family preservation services that keep children safe with their own families, preventing the need for foster care; and, when children cannot safely remain in their own families, utilizing foster care as a time-limited intervention with oversight by the court to achieve permanency through reunification, adoption or guardianship.

**Data on our child welfare system**

National aggregate data[[1]](#footnote-2) point to needed system improvements:

* Well over 650,000 children/youth are victims of a substantiated child maltreatment report each year.
* The only allegation of just over 60 percent of child maltreatment reports is “Neglect,” which is often associated with the consequences of family poverty.
* There are just under 432,000 children/youth in foster care.
* Among children/youth who entered foster care in recent fiscal years, nearly two-thirds are placed for reasons that include neglect.
* There are just under 124,000 children/youth in foster care who are currently waiting for adoption/permanency.
* About 20,000 youth age out of foster care each year without a permanent family.
* Youth age 14 and older are less likely to achieve permanency of any type in two years than younger children.
* Youth who age out of foster care without the permanence of a forever family experience negative outcomes: 40 percent experience homelessness,[[2]](#footnote-3) half have not found employment by age 24,[[3]](#footnote-4) more than 25 percent end up incarcerated,[[4]](#footnote-5) 71 percent of the females are pregnant by age 21,[[5]](#footnote-6) and one in four experience post-traumatic stress disorder.**[[6]](#footnote-7)**
* More than half of the children who enter foster care are eventually reunified with their families; over 1/3 of those children reunify within 12 months, while just under half of them reunify within two years.
* Nearly 90 percent of children/youth who enter care will eventually exit to a permanent home. However, this can take more than three years, as a number of children are in care for several years before they exit.

While current data demonstrates positive movement in recent years in the reduction of children entering foster care, it is clear our nation’s child welfare system must do more on the front end to prevent abuse and neglect from occurring in the first place; must improve efforts to provide children, parents, and foster parents with the services they need so that children do not stay in foster care for prolonged periods of time; and must ensure that no child or youth exits foster care without a permanent family.

**The purpose of the Executive Order**

The Executive Order (EO) aims to address these identified needs and strengthen America’s child welfare system through three key reforms: (1) improving partnerships between state agencies and public, private, faith-based and community organizations; (2) improving resources for vulnerable families and youth; and (3) improving federal oversight of key statutory requirements that keep children safely out of foster care and ensure efforts are made to achieve reunification, adoption, or guardianship when children have to be removed from their families.

The Administration believes these initiatives are will spur lasting improvements to our nation’s system because:

* We cannot rely on government alone to care for our nation’s children. We need partnerships with private, faith-based, and community organizations to achieve the best outcomes for vulnerable children and families.
* Those who step up to be resource families for children in foster care—including kin, guardians, foster parents, and adoptive parents—may lack adequate support to care for children who are recovering from both the trauma of abuse and neglect and the impact of being removed from their family homes and familiar environment.
* Although we have laws to protect the interests of children and promote positive outcomes for children and families, improved oversight of state child welfare practice is necessary to ensure full compliance with these laws and to secure justice for all families involved in the child welfare judicial system.

Specific strategies for each area of action include:

**Improving Partnerships:** This EO will encourage robust partnerships between state agencies and public, private, faith-based and community organizations. HHS will (1) publish localized data that can be used to develop community based prevention and family support services and to recruit foster and adoptive families, (2) hold states accountable for recruiting an adequate number of foster and adoptive homes for all children, and (3) provide guidance to States on best practices for working effectively with all community partners.

**Improving Resources:** This EO will improve access to adequate resources for all parents. HHS will (1) expand educational options for foster and adoptive parents; (2) increase access to trauma-informed training; (3) expand State access to financial help for guardianships; (4) enhance support for kinship care and older youth exiting foster care; and (5) enhance equality of treatment and access for all families through monitored compliance with the Multiethnic Placement Act.

**Improving Oversight**: This EO will improve federal oversight of key statutory requirements. HHS will (1) require each State’s Title IV-E Review and Child and Family Services Review to specify and to strengthen the assessments of critical requirements, including reasonable efforts to prevent removal and finalize permanency plans, filing petitions for termination of parental rights, when appropriate, within statutory timelines, and conducting family search and notification when children come into foster care; (2) issue guidance on the use of federal funds to support high quality legal representation for parents and children; (3) develop metrics to measure and evaluate state performance in achieving permanency; and (4) collect information on the effectiveness of State safety and risk assessments, which informs decisions regarding removal and reunification.

1. All data from National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) as of May 21, 2020, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Dworsky, A. & Courtney, M. E. (2010). Assessing the Impact of Extending Care beyond Age 18 on Homelessness: Emerging Findings from the Midwest Study. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Courtney, M., Dworsky, A., Lee, J., & Raap, M. (2009) Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 23 and 24. Chicago: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Courtney, Mark & Cusick, Gretchen & Havlicek, Judy & Perez, Alfred & Keller, Tom. (2007). Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth from Illinois: Outcomes at Age 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Courtney, Mark & Cusick, Gretchen & Havlicek, Judy & Perez, Alfred & Keller, Tom. (2007). Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth from Illinois: Outcomes at Age 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Pecora, P.J., Kessler, R.C., Williams, J., O’Brien, K., Dow ns, A.C., English, D., White, J., Hiripi, E., White, C.R., Wiggins, T., and Holmes, K. (2005). Improving family foster care: Findings from the Northwest foster care alumni study. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)