

Written Testimony of Rob Geen
Before the U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means
Strengthening Child Welfare and Protecting America's Children
June 26, 2024

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Neal, and distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to testify today about the importance of strengthening child welfare.

My name is Rob Geen, and I have worked in research, philanthropy, and advocacy to advance data-driven reforms to improve our nation's child welfare system—in areas such as child abuse and neglect investigation, family preservation and family support, kinship care, foster care, residential treatment, adoption, and youth aging out of care—over the last 35 years.

I currently serve as a fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC), a non-profit organization that combines the best ideas from both parties to promote health, security, and opportunity for all Americans. The organization was founded in 2007 by four former Senate majority leaders: Howard Baker, Tom Daschle, Bob Dole, and George Mitchell. BPC drives principled and politically viable policy solutions through the power of rigorous analysis, painstaking negotiation, and aggressive advocacy.

I also chair the board of trustees for the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, a national, nonprofit public charity dedicated to finding forever families for the more than 140,000 children waiting to be adopted from foster care in the United States and Canada. Through its signature program, Wendy's Wonderful Kids[®], the Foundation supports the hiring of adoption professionals, known as recruiters, who serve children most at risk of aging out of foster care without a permanent home.

History of Collaboration on Federal Child Welfare Legislation

Bipartisanship has been a defining feature of federal child welfare legislation for decades. Between 1980 and 2018, Congress passed more than a dozen significant bipartisan legislative reforms to help ensure that children have safe, stable families and to improve our nation's child welfare system. All of these reforms are examples of significant bipartisan agreement. In fact, all but one passed with unanimous consent. In addition, hundreds of members of Congress have been affiliated with bipartisan caucuses, such as the Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth and the Congressional Adoption Caucus. Those of us in the field often feel pride and appreciation for the long legacy of cross-party collaboration in child welfare.

In 1993, Congress created Title IV-B Subpart 2, now known as the MaryLee Allen Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) programs in response to the widespread perception of a crisis in our nation's child welfare system. The lingering impacts of both the crack cocaine and AIDS epidemics left a child welfare system facing high staff turnover and low morale, a shrinking supply of foster parents and foster homes, and a shortage of related support services such as drug and alcohol treatment and mental health care. Today, there are parallel concerns about the treatment needs of families suffering from opioid addiction and related substance use challenges, unmet mental health needs particularly among youth, and ongoing concerns about the lingering effects of the COVID crisis on our nation's child welfare system.

Ever since its creation, Congress has used the Promoting Safe and Stable Families program, through both policy and funding allocations, to highlight and address key challenges in child protection. The program requires that states and Tribes spend a significant portion of their funds in four key areas: (1) family preservation, (2) family support, (3) time-limited family reunification, and (4) adoption promotion and support. In addition to related evaluation and technical assistance, the program's set asides seek to improve child welfare judicial practices, ensure caseworker visits with children, help kinship caregivers access services and supports, and address the needs of children affected by caregiver substance misuse.

While a relatively small program compared to the Title IV-E entitlement that supports foster care and adoption, Title IV-B shines a light on areas in need of attention and has been a critical source of flexible funding available to states and Tribes, enabling them to craft innovations that address the specific circumstances in their communities. States and Tribes can use Title IV-B funds to serve a broader range of children, youth, and families with a wider array of services compared to Title IV-E funds. In this way, Title IV-B is a critical complement to Title IV-E funding. However, two decades of steady erosion to the program's funding has limited the impact that Title IV-B can have. For example, a recent financing survey of state child welfare agencies found that "Title IV-B expenditures have decreased by 14 percent over the decade."

Items for Congressional Consideration

I am pleased that the committee is examining how reauthorization of Title IV-B can continue to help strengthen child welfare and protect America's families and children through today's hearing. I came to the Bipartisan Policy Center in 2023 to lead BPC's Child Welfare Initiative and help organize policy discussions that result in effective, bipartisan solutions. One of the first undertakings of our initiative was an intensive 50-state landscape analysis that provided rich insight into the state and national policy environment. This included a [public opinion poll](#), a review of [child welfare legislation](#) in all 50 states, focus groups and stakeholder [interviews](#). The findings from our research track closely with the issues that Congress is deliberating as part of the Title IV-B reauthorization and related reforms.

An overarching finding from our research is that, although there are some areas marked by conflicting perspectives, there are many areas where bipartisanship runs deep. While polarizing

rhetoric often overshadows discussions of common ground, there are many areas of agreement. Some of the most relevant takeaways from our work as it relates to the committee's focus are the following:

- There is overwhelming support for the vision of the Family First Prevention Services Act. There is recognition that high-quality, short-term, therapeutic residential interventions are needed for a very small number of children. There is strong support for enhancing child maltreatment prevention and family preservation services.
- At the same time, there are frustrations in the field over implementation of Family First.
 - Many states are struggling to increase the capacity of alternatives to residential settings as they seek to eliminate the use of non-therapeutic group homes.
 - There is insufficient community-based service capacity to meet the high needs of youth in the system, especially effective mental health services.
 - States and Tribes are running into barriers in taking full advantage of the prevention funding available as a result of Family First. This includes concerns about the Prevention Services Clearinghouse and how funding can be used to meet the concrete needs of families.
- There is widespread concern that child welfare is becoming a catch-all system, being asked to make up for the failure of other systems and resulting in some children and families being inappropriately involved.
 - States are addressing this by clarifying their definitions of child neglect, making improvements in mandatory reporting and investigations, and enhancing legal representation for both children and parents.
- There is widespread recognition of the challenges that states and Tribes face in maintaining a qualified workforce.
- There is considerable appreciation for the positive progress achieved in supporting kinship families and yet recognition that there is far more work to be done to ensure that kin can best support children.
- There is a strong desire to strengthen the Indian Child Welfare Act.
- There is widespread support for reducing the administrative burden that accompanies federal funding, especially for Tribes, while also improving system oversight and accountability.
- There is significant interest in creating more flexible funding options that allows states and Tribes to meet unique community needs.
- There is a strong desire to improve the outcomes for older youth involved in the system, and frustration with the persistent challenges in meeting the basic needs of youth aging out of foster care at age 18 and ensuring that they have meaningful adult relationships.
- There is significant energy around re-examining policies and practices associated with terminating parental rights.

- There is appreciation for the growing role that foster youth, birth parents, and resource families are playing in child welfare policy and practice discussions, but also a sense that we are still not fully leveraging their lived experience and expertise.
- Finally, there is widespread recognition of the need to continue to expand the evidence base for child welfare interventions.
 - The Wendy’s Wonderful Kids program referenced earlier is an example of the bipartisan support that exists for evidence-based efforts to improve child welfare. Supported in a number of states with IV-B dollars, Wendy’s Wonderful Kids recruiters serve children in 47 states and the District of Columbia, and 19 states are scaling up their programs with a combination of public and private investment so that every child available for adoption can benefit from a dedicated recruiter. To date, more than 14,200 children and youth who were most at risk of aging out of care without a family, found permanency with this program.

Bills introduced by members of this committee seek to address many of the challenges listed above.

In addition to congressional bipartisan support, the American public also recognizes the challenges that our nation’s child welfare system faces and the opportunity to better support families. A [BPC poll](#) found that Americans across the country see the child welfare system’s mission as two-fold: ensuring child safety and strengthening families. Additionally, respondents:

- Appreciate the complexity of the decisions that child welfare agencies must make.
- Think that parents who have been neglectful can, with appropriate support, provide safe and nurturing care for their children.
- Overwhelmingly advocate for engaging extended family members when parents face challenges.
- Believe that child safety and family assistance should be a shared effort between government and community and religious organizations.

Thank you for your continued commitment to keeping children safe and supporting families. I encourage Congress to move on a bipartisan basis to reauthorize Title IV-B. Reauthorization is both overdue and critical to provide certainty to states and ensure the program is equipped to meet current challenges facing the child welfare system. I look forward to your questions.