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The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute

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Spotlight On:
The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute

*Alexandra Kuenzli**

I. INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to raising awareness about the millions of children around the world in need of permanent, safe, and loving homes and to eliminating the barriers that hinder these children from realizing their basic right to a family. CCAI's vision is a world in which every child knows the love and support of a family. This article will highlight key programs CCAI uses to implement its vision, with a special focus on the Foster Youth Internship Program and its role in elevating the voices of former youth in care. This article will also address the impact of COVID-19 on this important program.

CCAI was founded in 2001 to support the Congressional Coalition on Adoption (CCA). CCA is the largest bicameral, bipartisan caucus in Congress. It was created in 1985 by members of Congress dedicated to child welfare and is currently chaired by members from each chamber and party. In 1998, CCA caucus leaders hired a full-time fellow, Kerry Marks Hasenbalg, to work in the Senate to carry out CCA's work. In 2001, CCA co-chairs created CCAI with bipartisan support in both the Senate and House of Representatives.

CCAI has five core programs: the Congressional Resource Program, the Angels in Adoption Program, the 20/20 Vision Program, National Adoption Day, and the Foster Youth Internship Program. These programs seek to educate policymakers, honor extraordinary individuals in the world of adoption and child welfare, create public-private partnerships to improve child welfare policy and practice, and raise awareness about adoption. While these are all valuable programs, this article will focus on the Foster Youth Internship Program, a congressional internship for young adults who spent time in the child welfare system.

II. FOSTER YOUTH INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

The Foster Youth Internship Program (FYI Program) began in 2003 with the goal of raising federal policymakers' awareness about the needs and unique perspectives of youth in care. Every summer, the FYI Program brings twelve college students or recent graduates to Washington, D.C. to intern in a congressional office and write a policy report with recommendations on reforming the U.S. child welfare system. The Foster Youth Interns (FYIs) present this report in briefings to Congress, the White House Domestic Policy Council, and, beginning in 2019, to private sector industry leaders and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The report is also released to policymakers and child welfare advocates across the country.

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To be eligible, a youth must have spent at least twenty-four consecutive months or at least a total of thirty-six months in foster care in the United States and be willing to share their experiences. The youth also must have completed at least four semesters at an accredited institution of higher learning, such as a college, university, or vocational school, and either currently be pursuing a degree or have graduated within the past two years. CCAI provides the FYIs with a weekly stipend, housing, and transportation. CCAI also provides the FYIs with advocacy trainings and networking opportunities with child welfare experts. Lastly, CCAI pairs each FYI with a policy report advisor who assists with the report-writing process.

III. FROM FYI RECOMMENDATION TO FEDERAL POLICY

Since the FYI Program's inception, there have been several instances of members of Congress turning a FYI recommendation into policy. This article discusses three examples below.

Mary Lee, a 2004 FYI, inspired the Fostering Adoption to Further Student Achievement Act, also known as the Mary Lee Act. The Mary Lee Act became law in 2007 as an amendment to the College Cost Reduction and Access Act. The law gives youth adopted after the age of thirteen the option to be considered an independent student and not include their adoptive parents' income in their financial aid requests. This prevents families who adopt older youth from having to choose between adoption and that youth receiving federal financial support available to foster youth for higher education.

Maurissa Sorensen, a 2012 FYI, inspired the Foster Youth Higher Education Opportunities Act. This Act became law as a provision in the 2014 spending bill and ensures that the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form is used as a tool to notify youth in care when they are eligible for education assistance programs. Prior to this Act, the FAFSA included a box for foster youth to check to designate they were foster youth. However, the federal government did not use this information to notify these youth of the federal financial supports for youth in care pursuing higher education.

Recently, 2019 FYI Brittney Barros's story inspired Representative Annie Kuster to introduce the "Keeping Siblings Together" resolution. This resolution, introduced on March 4, 2020, encourages states to make every effort to place children in homes with their siblings, provide siblings not placed together opportunities to communicate with each other, and, when siblings are separated, document the reasons why. Although the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act requires states to make "reasonable efforts" to place siblings together in foster care, studies estimate most siblings are still separated.

IV. COVID-19 PANDEMIC WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to COVID-19, the 2020 FYI Program became the virtual CCAI Foster Youth Intern COVID-19 Pandemic Working Group. The working group's goal was to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the U.S. foster care system. The group divided research into four sub-groups: higher education and well-being, safety and stability, child welfare workforce,

and permanency. Each group explored the current state of the topic; highlighted successful local, state, and federal initiatives; and provided federal legislation recommendations based on their research and lived experience. The FYIs presented their research at a virtual webinar on July 22, 2020.

The following provides an overview of each 2020 FYI's recommendation in the report, *Seeing Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic: Creating Change for Vulnerable Children and Families*:

Tashia Roberson-Wing: Improving Postsecondary Success for Foster Youth During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond. Tashia recommends that Congress amend Title VII of the Higher Education Act (HEA) to award formula grants to states to address the housing, mental health, social, and academic support needs of foster and homeless youth pursuing a postsecondary degree.

Junely Merwin: Supporting Pregnant and Parenting Youth in Foster Care Impacted by COVID-19. Junely recommends that Congress provide funding through Chafee or Title IV-B of the Social Security Act (Title IV-B) to support the basic needs of pregnant and parenting youth in care. Further, Junely recommends that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issue guidance to states on meeting the needs of expectant and parenting youth in care.

Shanell Lavallie: Expanding Cultural Connections and Educational Supports for Foster Youth in Tribal Colleges. Shanell recommends that Congress expand the American Indian Tribally Controlled Colleges and Universities (TCCUs) program, authorized under the 1998 HEA amendments, to provide TCCUs with funding to establish a program for tribal students who have experienced foster care that will help them succeed in higher education and connect with their tribal communities.

Cortez Carey: Educational Technology Access and Support for All Youth in Foster Care. Cortez recommends that Congress authorize a new grant program under the HEA to provide all foster youth with computers, Wi-Fi access, internet hotspots, online tutors, and other necessary technology supports to ensure equitable virtual learning opportunities.

Melvin Roy: Establishing a Trust Fund to Ensure Financial Stability for Young Adults in Foster Care. Melvin recommends that Congress establish the Hope Fund, a new federal program that would mandate states with extended foster care to create and contribute to a trust fund for every eligible youth in care aged eighteen to twenty-one. The Hope Fund would be authorized under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act (Title IV-E) and would be financed through a federal-state partnership.

Autumn Adams: Increasing Access to Kinship Navigator Program Funding for Informal Kinship Providers. Autumn recommends that the Children's Bureau create a pilot program to test different types of evidence-based standards that may be more appropriate to evaluate the effectiveness of kinship navigator programs (KNPs). Autumn

also recommends that Congress require KNPs receiving federal funds under the Family First Prevention Services Act to serve not only kinship caregivers for families formally involved in the child welfare system but also informal kinship caregivers.

Hailey D'Elia: Bridging the Digital Divide with Broadband and Technology Access for Vulnerable Youth and Families. Hailey recommends that Congress allow states to use Title IV-B funds to provide internet and other technology to vulnerable youth and families involved in the child welfare system. Hailey also recommends that Congress authorize a monthly reimbursement of up to \$100 for low-income families to support purchasing broadband and other devices, such as a phone, laptop, or tablet.

Isabelle Goodrich: Clarifying Kinship Navigator Programs Can Cover Costs of Direct Goods and Services to Assist Kinship Families. Isabelle recommends that Congress amend Title IV-E to clarify that states can use federal funding under KNPs to purchase critical goods and supplies to help caregivers meet basic needs and maintain family stability during the pandemic and other times of crisis.

Alan Abutin: Keeping Families Together Through Technology and Virtual Mental Health Services. Alan recommends that Congress allow states to use Title IV-E foster care funding to pay for technologies to connect youth and families with mental health and other essential child welfare services. Alan also recommends that Congress use Title IV-E funding to provide an enhanced 75% funding match to encourage states to provide foster and adoptive families with wireless internet access, cell phones, laptops, and other technologies to improve access to mental health and other child welfare services remotely.

Makayla James: Caseworker Support Investment: Prioritizing Training for Child Welfare Workforce During COVID-19. Makayla recommends that the Children's Bureau disseminate guidance to state child welfare agencies prioritizing training during the COVID-19 pandemic. Makayla also recommends that Congress increase Title IV-B administrative dollars and the reimbursement rate for Title IV-E training and administration to support child welfare workforce retention, training, and administration.

Laila-Rose Hudson: Life After COVID-19: Child Welfare Disaster Preparedness Moving Forward. Laila-Rose recommends that Congress provide funding through the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act to help state child welfare systems create disaster preparedness plans, prepare for future disaster situations like COVID-19, and ensure the safety of children and youth under all circumstances.

Ian Marx: The Importance of Caseworkers and Foster Youth Virtual Connections in COVID-19. Ian recommends that Congress increase Title IV-B funding and direct some of that funding to support the purchase of technology, including cell phones, laptops, tablets, and internet access, for children and families in the child welfare system to ensure foster youth receive necessary caseworker support.

Each recommendation shows not only the ways in which Congress should immediately support youth and families impacted by COVID-19 but also how Congress should increase funding and support for the child welfare system so that it is better prepared for times of crisis. The FYIs point to gaps in funding or policy that already exist and have been exacerbated by COVID-19. These recommendations call on Congress to increase educational supports for youth in care, expand technology access for youth and families, support pregnant and parenting youth in care and kinship caregivers, and invest in caseworker training and child welfare system disaster preparedness. For more information on each of these recommendations, the full report is available on CCAI's website.

V. CONCLUSION

Since 2001, CCAI has worked to support policymakers through various programs designed to elevate the voices of those with direct child welfare experience. In particular, the FYI Program creates an opportunity for policymakers to gain relevant and timely information directly from the youth their policies impact. The Foster Youth Intern COVID-19 Pandemic Working Group continues this legacy with twelve insightful recommendations to support children and families.

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