

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 19, 2021

Associate Commissioner Aysha Schomburg
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
The Administration for Children and Families
Children's Bureau
330 C Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Associate Commissioner Aysha Schomburg,

We write today in support of children and youth in the foster care system as they continue to face a number of unique challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the steady progress of nationwide vaccine distribution, like many Americans, we feel a sense of reassurance that our nation will soon transition into a more manageable period of the health and economic crises that the nation has endured for over a year now. As efforts to curtail the pandemic prove successful, it is clear that the long-term impacts of the pandemic will be significant. As you continue to work through year-one priorities, we ask that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) ensure that youth currently in and transitioning out of the foster care system receive the support and resources they need to thrive. We also ask that you prioritize implementation of the *Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018* to ensure that children, youth, and their families can access a range of services to keep them safely together and prevent unnecessary entry into foster care whenever possible. For circumstances when foster care placement is needed, we request that you work with states, tribes, and territories to ensure that children and youth in foster care have high quality placements and trauma-informed care.

It is well-documented that current and former foster youth face disparate outcomes compared to their peers in various areas, including educational attainment and employment rates and earnings.¹ A longitudinal study in Iowa, better known as “The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth,” found that by age 23 and 24, one-quarter of youth with experience in foster care did not have a high school diploma or a GED, and although nearly one third had completed at least one year of college, only 6% had completed a 2- or 4-year post-secondary degree.² Foster youth aging out of the system are also more likely to become homeless and struggle with job insecurity.³

The past year has been a difficult time for many. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the overwhelming obstacles youth in the foster care system face, particularly the challenges associated with transitioning into adulthood after leaving the system.

¹https://fostercareandeducation.org/DesktopModules/Bring2mind/DMX/Download.aspx?EntryId=2032&Command=Core_Download&method=inline&PortalId=0&TabId=124

² <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Midwest-Study-Youth-Preparing-to-Leave-Care-Iowa.pdf>

³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10852350902735601>

In fact, former foster youth are some of the most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ According to a study from the University of Pennsylvania, former foster youth have lost their jobs during the pandemic at a rate three times that of the general population. Additionally, two-thirds of study participants reported that COVID-19 had a major negative impact on their educational progress or attainment.⁵ These outcomes can be partially explained by inconsistent access to the internet, with only 5% of rural foster youth and 21% of urban foster youth having consistent access to computers in their homes.⁶

These statistics are heartbreaking and unacceptable. We believe that if changes are made to strengthen support and the resources for foster youth, they will be better able to realize their goals and become active members of our nation's workforce.

We greatly appreciate the Biden Administration's leadership in working with state, tribal and territorial child welfare agencies to slow the spread of the virus and "build back better." We respectfully ask that you continue to encourage states to take full advantage of existing flexibilities and make additional changes to best support foster youth. Specifically, we request that you:

- **Allow title IV-B funds to be used to provide internet and other technology to vulnerable foster youth and families.** The virtual working and learning environments we have experienced during the pandemic are likely to last long after the spread of the virus is slowed.⁷ Therefore, we must ensure that foster youth do not continue to fall behind in meeting their work and study obligations because they do not have necessary technological tools available to them. We ask that allowable expenses be expanded to include laptop computers, tablets, and internet access for children and families in the child welfare system.
- **Work with states to address the impact of the digital divide on foster youth.** We were proud to vote in support of the *Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021*, which increased support for John H. Chafee Foster Care Programs for Successful Transition to Adulthood, mandated that a state operating a program under Title IV-E cannot require that a child who is in foster care leave solely because of the child's age until October 1, 2021, and suspended certain training and postsecondary educational requirements that could be barriers to youth accessing Chafee supports during the public health emergency. In addition to working with states, territories, tribes and tribal organizations to ensure this law is implemented effectively, we ask that you consider long-term solutions to technology-access challenges that have been exacerbated during the public health emergency. We ask that you work with child welfare agencies on context-specific plans to ensure foster youth have resources necessary to participate in online instruction or work virtually.

⁴ <https://imprintnews.org/coronavirus/study-devastating-pandemic-era-former-foster-youth/50574>

⁵ https://fieldcenteratpenn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Foster-Youth-COVID-19-FINAL_Corrected.pdf

⁶ <https://www.ifoster.org/how-technology-is-impacting-the-foster-care-community/>

⁷ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/04/06/telecommuting-will-likely-continue-long-after-the-pandemic/>

- **Implement a plan to ensure that agencies proactively reach out to foster youth to inform them about benefits related to stimulus checks, unemployment insurance, and other COVID-19-related assistance.** We ask that you work to ensure foster youth are aware of all resources available to them during this difficult time.
- **Help ensure that foster youth and other at-risk youth are aware of and have the resources to take advantage of the extension of the earned income tax credit (EITC) to working youth under age 26 and work toward making the child tax credit (CTC) as accessible as possible.** We were pleased to see that the American Rescue Plan included an extension of the EITC to working youth under age 26. We believe this change has significant potential to equip former foster youth to become productive members of the workforce. We ask that the Administration help make foster youth and other vulnerable youth aware of this expansion, as well as help ensure they have the resources to take advantage of this opportunity. In addition, we are proud that the American Rescue Plan temporarily expands the CTC and the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC) for 2021. We ask that the Administration make the CTC as accessible as possible by working with families to ensure they know how the monthly payments work and allow non-filers to establish eligibility. We also ask that the Administration provide flexibility for caregivers of children in the welfare system to claim a dependent.
- **Create and implement a plan to ensure that foster youth have access to and are aware of mental health supports.** Foster youth who have aged out of the system are like other populations experiencing isolation due to the pandemic, but many lack substantive social supports. The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental illnesses. Given the high rates of trauma experienced by foster youth and the increase in reports of mental illness during the pandemic, we ask that you work to ensure foster youth are provided the necessary mental health resources to support their resilience during this difficult time. The *Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018* allows Title IV-E funds to cover evidence-based mental health services and programs for children, youth, and their families. We encourage you to support states, tribes, and territories in development and implementation of robust Title IV-E Prevention Program plans that include a range of mental health services.
- **Commit to working with Congress and states, tribes, and territories to address inequalities in the child welfare system in the U.S. and outline steps to make child welfare programs more equitable.** Youth of color frequently experience negative outcomes, such as homelessness, unemployment, economic hardship, and involvement with the criminal justice system, at higher rates than their white peers after transitioning out of the foster care system.⁸ We ask that the Biden Administration work with youth, parents, kinship caregivers with lived expertise, as well as child welfare agencies and Congress to play a leading role in ensuring better opportunities for foster youth and combat the racial disparities we have known to persist within the system for too long.

⁸ <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/homeless-and-foster-youth-racial-inequity-and-policy-shifts-for-systemic-change/>

Thank you for your diligent, impactful work on behalf of our nation's foster youth. We appreciate your time and attention to this urgent matter. We are grateful for your partnership as we continue to work on behalf of youth in need.

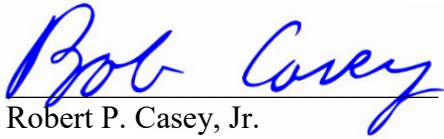
Sincerely,



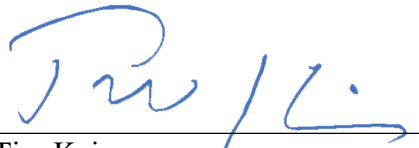
Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



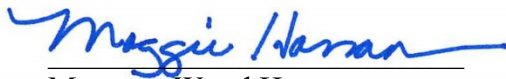
Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator



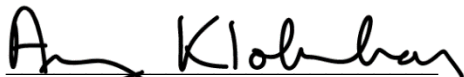
Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



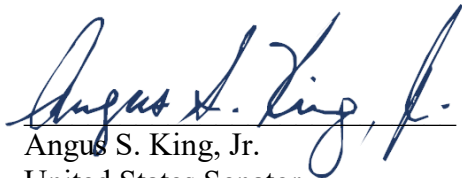
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Jack Reed
United States Senator



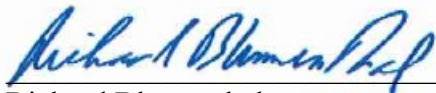
Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator