**A better way to help vulnerable children and families**

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Every year, thousands of American children are taken from their homes and placed in foster care.

And in the midst of an opioid epidemic, those numbers are rising.

For many children, foster care is absolutely necessary and even lifesaving. Many of those children find stability they never had thanks to the tireless work of dedicated social workers, foster parents, judges and treatment providers.

But in many cases, it's possible to improve a child's family situation at home and avoid the trauma of being separated from family, friends and school, as well as the long-term cost of foster care. Most children come into foster care not as a result of physical or sexual abuse but due to complex factors related to neglect.

According to national data, in more than one-third of foster care cases, parental substance abuse is cited as a reason for removing a child from home. Experts report that, in reality, the percentage of foster care cases involving parental substance abuse is likely twice that high. These families are often also dealing with issues such as poverty, mental or physical illness, or parental incarceration.

More than half of children who enter foster care eventually live with their parents again. But the unfortunate reality is that many foster children struggle to deal with their experiences, even when it becomes safe for them to return home. Historically, foster children have been more likely to encounter the juvenile and adult criminal-justice systems, more likely to become pregnant as teenagers and less likely to hold down a job.

When we hear from children who have spent time in foster care, something they often say is: "You could have helped my mom" or "you could have helped my dad."

Take, for example, the case of a young man from Florida placed in foster care at age 11 because his parents and other family members were addicted to drugs. He said that if his parents had gotten the substance abuse treatment they needed, it's possible he could have grown up safely at home. Instead, he aged out of the system at 18, leaving him to navigate adulthood on his own and without the support of a family.

We agree there is a better way to help vulnerable children and families. That's why we chose to work together, across party lines, to create long-term, structural changes to the child welfare system. In June, we introduced the bipartisan, bicameral Family First Prevention Services Act, to strengthen families by doing more to keep children from entering foster care, and to ensure that they are in the right setting if they can't stay safely at home.

The legislation would begin a new era for the child welfare system by aligning the funding with what we all believe: Foster care should be limited, temporary and high-quality. Under this bill, instead of having a system that just pays for foster care, states would receive federal support to strengthen families through substance abuse treatment, mental-health services and in-home parenting programs Co to allow parents or other relatives to get the help they need to safely care for their kids.

It would also Co for the first time Co set high national standards for foster care group homes to ensure that the most vulnerable children get clinical and professional help to address the traumas they have experienced.

Child advocates have been seeking these changes for more than two decades, and we worked together Co House and Senate, in a bipartisan process Co to draft the final bill. More than 300 child welfare groups, from the American Academy of Pediatrics to the Children's Defense Fund, to Catholic Charities and Focus on the Family, have endorsed the bill.

The House of Representatives decisively passed the bill in June.

When the Senate resumes legislative work this week, it will have the opportunity to take an important step to help children and their families. Our most vulnerable have already been waiting too long.

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