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Safe Families: Unleashing the Power of Community to Care for Children

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GOVERNMENT-RUN FOSTER CARE IS FAILING KIDS

At any given time, an average of nearly 403,000 children are languishing in foster care in the United States.¹ Within the last year alone, the number of children in foster care in the U.S. spiked by more than 14,000 children to a population of 415,129 during FY 2014.² These vulnerable children deserve safety, love, stability and the hope of a brighter future. Sadly, state-run child welfare systems are failing to meet this critical mission.

A 2004 lawsuit filed against the Mississippi Department of Children and Family Services, for example, alleged the state was failing to protect children in its care.³ State social workers were responsible for overseeing the cases of 48 children on average, a level that the state itself classified as “BEYOND DANGER[OUS]!”⁴ In some counties, social workers were expected to oversee more than 100 children.⁵

The state had a backlog of thousands of maltreatment investigations and a dangerously slow response to allegations of abuse, with investigations regularly delayed more than 72 hours and as long as 230 hours in some cases.⁶⁻⁷ Worse yet, the number of children suffering maltreatment while in DCFS custody was more than five times the allowable federal standard.⁸ In 2008, Mississippi settled the lawsuit and agreed to take remedial actions to fix the system.

But even seven years after the case was settled, the state still had not implemented agreed-upon reforms to improve the child welfare system and protect vulnerable children. In danger of being held in contempt for this failure, the state publicly admitted this past July that it had failed to meet court-ordered requirements in a proposed agreement filed with the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Mississippi.⁹

These problems are not unique to Mississippi. Across the country, child welfare systems are crumbling and kids are falling through the cracks.¹⁰ In Massachusetts, the Department of Children and Families came under intense scrutiny after an investigation into the disappearance and death of 5-year-old Jeremiah Oliver revealed that the child’s state social worker failed to visit the home for more than seven months, despite the fact that the home was under investigation for allegations of abuse.¹¹ State and federal data reveal that Massachusetts caseworkers missed nearly one in five mandatory monthly home visits in 2013 and ranked 45th in protecting children from repeated abuse or neglect in the six months after leaving foster care.¹²

The experience in Kansas, while not as high-profile as the previous examples, is in many ways indicative of the struggles experienced by state child welfare agencies across the country. According to data reported by the Kansas Department for Children and Families, the number of children in the state’s foster care system is trending upward.¹³⁻¹⁴ Since 2014, the foster care population in the Sunflower State reached record levels in six separate months, peaking at the current high of 6,522 in July 2015.¹⁵ Reasons for this increase, both in Kansas and across the nation, include family breakdown, increased awareness and reporting of suspected abuse and neglect, and substance abuse issues, among others. Increases in reporting of suspected maltreatment and growing foster care populations mean larger caseloads for state social workers impacting the quality of services and increasing risk to children.

If state policymakers are serious about protecting at-risk children, they must confront the failures of the government-run child welfare system and embrace proven, innovative solutions that reignite the spirit of community.

FOSTER CARE: NECESSARY, NOT IDEAL

Policymakers must do more to eradicate the evils of physical and sexual abuse of children; however, the fact is that most children in government-run foster care are not victims of abuse. Nearly 70 percent of foster kids are there because of neglect.¹⁶⁻¹⁷ Incidents of physical or sexual abuse represent a distinct minority of child welfare cases, with physical abuse accounting for only 12 percent of foster care entries and sexual abuse representing less than 6 percent of entries.¹⁸ Despite the fact that 70 percent of children in foster care are there for reasons other than abuse, only half are ever reunited with their biological families.¹⁹ These sad facts illustrate government's failure to adequately prioritize the preservation of families in crisis and the opportunity to help more children enjoy safety, stability, and the hope of a better and brighter future.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services promises that child welfare systems are designed to "promote the well-being of children by ensuring safety, achieving permanency, and strengthening families to care for their children successfully," [emphasis added].²⁰ States are not fulfilling those promises. Although most children have goals of reunification, fewer of them are actually being reunited with their families.²¹ At the same time, more and more children are languishing in foster care until they are legally required to leave at age 18.²² To make matters worse, less than half of the more than 100,000 children in the foster care system who are eligible for adoption actually get adopted each year.²³ By its own measures, the government-run child welfare system is failing at both promoting reunification through strengthening families and finding the remaining children permanent, loving families.

FOSTER CHILDREN FACE AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Although foster care is intended to be temporary, it has become a permanent fact of life for far too many children. For the 24,000 or more children emancipated from foster care each year, outcomes are especially bleak.²⁴ Among those children who have aged out of the system, 40 percent will experience homelessness, and half will struggle with substance abuse and unemployment.²⁵ Sixty percent of young men will be convicted of a crime, and nearly three-quarters of young women will become pregnant before age 21.²⁶ Given these struggles, it is no surprise that many emancipated foster youth experience a life marked by dependency, with more than three-quarters of young women and nearly half of young men receiving means-tested welfare benefits.²⁷

It isn't just children who age-out of foster care that face a bleak future, though. Research shows that children who have had any type of contact with foster care are far more likely to experience developmental and behavioral problems than their peers in similarly disadvantaged home environments, regardless of the length of time in care, their age at entry, or the number of placements.²⁸ Research has also found that children who enter foster care disproportionately experience poor educational outcomes. A national study conducted by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, for example, found that just half of all foster children will complete high school by age 18.²⁹ Among those who do graduate high school, just one-fifth will attend college, and only 8 percent will graduate with either a two- or four-year degree.³⁰⁻³¹ That research further found that children in foster care, regardless of the length of time in care, are twice as likely to be absent from school, twice as likely to be suspended, three times as likely to be expelled, and up to 3.5 times as likely to be receiving special education services. Perhaps most shockingly, the average 17- to 18-year-old in foster care reads at just a seventh-grade level. Given these poor outcomes and challenges, it is little wonder that contact with the foster care system is often a precursor to a life of dependency and hopelessness.



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A SUPPLY LINE FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING

If those poor outcomes were not bad enough, research reveals that an astoundingly high number of sex trafficking victims had prior contact with the foster care system. A 2007 study by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, for example, identified 2,652 child victims of sex trafficking.³² More than 80 percent of those victims had prior contact with the child welfare system.³³ In New York City alone, 75 percent of child sex trafficking victims had been in foster care.³⁴

In Connecticut, the Department of Children and Families reported that 86 of 88 children identified as sex trafficking victims had some prior contact with the state-run child welfare system.³⁵ California reports that 59 percent of children arrested on prostitution charges in L.A. County spent time in foster care and estimates that between 50 percent and 80 percent of all child sex trafficking victims in the state have had contact with the child welfare system.³⁶⁻³⁷

In June 2003, the FBI launched the Innocence Lost National Initiative, a coordinated law enforcement effort aimed at ending the sex trafficking of children in the United States. The FBI reports that of the more than 2,700 children rescued over the last twelve years, 60 percent had prior involvement in the foster care system.³⁸⁻³⁹ Sadly, children who languish in the foster care system often struggle with feelings of rejection and lack a sense of belonging, making them prime targets for sexual exploitation by traffickers who lure them with promises of affection, money, and independence.

A BETTER WAY FORWARD

Government-run child welfare systems have faced these problems for decades. But every time the failures of a state's child welfare system are exposed, the response is always the same: hire more social workers, increase training, and spend more taxpayer money on a failing system. These ideas have failed. Children deserve better than the status quo.

In 2002, Dr. David Anderson, executive director of Lydia Home Association, a Chicago-based child welfare agency founded in 1916, launched an innovative model for strengthening families and preventing children from ever entering foster care. Dr. Anderson conceived of the idea after encountering a single mother desperately seeking help, but whom Lydia could not help due to regulations imposed on it by bureaucrats in Illinois. While Lydia was unable to help this mother, Dr. Anderson and his family volunteered in their personal capacity to care for her children while she worked to get back on her feet. In just a few short weeks, the mother addressed the issues she needed to and was reunited with her children.

Dr. Anderson used this experience to develop the "Safe Families for Children" program, a new model for abuse and neglect prevention that mobilized the community to care for families in crisis before problems rose to a level requiring state intervention. The Safe Families model, based on the simple value of neighbors helping neighbors, quickly grew into a national movement impacting the lives of nearly 20,000 children.⁴⁰

SAFE FAMILIES HELPS STRUGGLING FAMILIES BEFORE CRISES ESCALATE

In most states, child welfare agencies are only able to intervene if there is evidence that child abuse or neglect has occurred. By the time the state gets involved, many families' crises have spiraled too far out of control to prevent the permanent removal of the child. Safe Families, on the other hand, is able to reach at-risk families earlier, and often more effectively, than government-run child welfare agencies.

Child abuse and neglect do not exist in a vacuum, instead often arising from a host of other underlying factors.⁴¹ Parents or caregivers, for example, may be experiencing mental health issues or substance abuse, or have misguided attitudes or knowledge about parenting, especially when the parent was also a victim of abuse. Families may be experiencing domestic violence or suffering from financial and employment struggles, and social isolation. Also, some parents' difficulty coping with a child's disability or behavioral issues highlights their lack of parenting skills and can often exacerbate other problems.⁴²

Although child victims often come from families struggling with these issues, no one issue leads directly to maltreatment or provides an excuse for it. Many families struggling with one or more of these issues never abuse or neglect their children. Although these factors can never predict whether maltreatment will occur, they are important for understanding the circumstances that are often precursors to maltreatment. The Safe Families model is uniquely designed to reach families struggling with these and other issues before the situation escalates to maltreatment.

When faced with a crisis, most people turn to their social safety net – their family, friends, or religious community – for support. Sadly, many families who eventually have contact with the child welfare system are socially isolated and lack this basic support structure. It is at these moments when one or more parents are faced with an overwhelming crisis that their children are especially at risk for neglect or abuse. If at-risk families are able to get help quickly to address these crises, the risk of neglect or abuse can be greatly reduced. Safe Families for Children was designed to provide this type of early intervention in a loving, non-threatening way.

The Safe Families model is built on three key pillars. First, the model is run almost entirely by volunteers. Trained, professional staff oversee placements, but all services are provided directly by thoroughly trained and screened volunteers. Second, biological families seek support voluntarily and maintain full parental and legal rights while receiving services. Unlike state-run child welfare programs, parents can feel safe asking for help without fear of losing their children. Parents are given the peace of mind that their children are being well-cared for and will be returned to them without issue once they have achieved stability. This encourages families to come out of the shadows and seek help as soon as troubles arise, thereby increasing a family's chances of achieving stability and preventing child maltreatment. Third, Safe Families is community-focused. Understanding that many of the families it serves do not have family, friends, or a community to turn to for help, Safe Families works to build lasting relationships that provide families with the social safety net they lacked. Due to the legal and relational limitations of government-run foster care, it is nearly impossible for foster families to build an open, supportive relationship with the biological parents of their foster child. However, Safe Families' unique structure not only allows but encourages host families to build deep relationships with the parents of the child placed in the home. Often, these relationships last well after the child is reunited with his or her family, allowing the family to maintain stability.



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HOW SAFE FAMILIES PROMOTES POSITIVE CHANGE

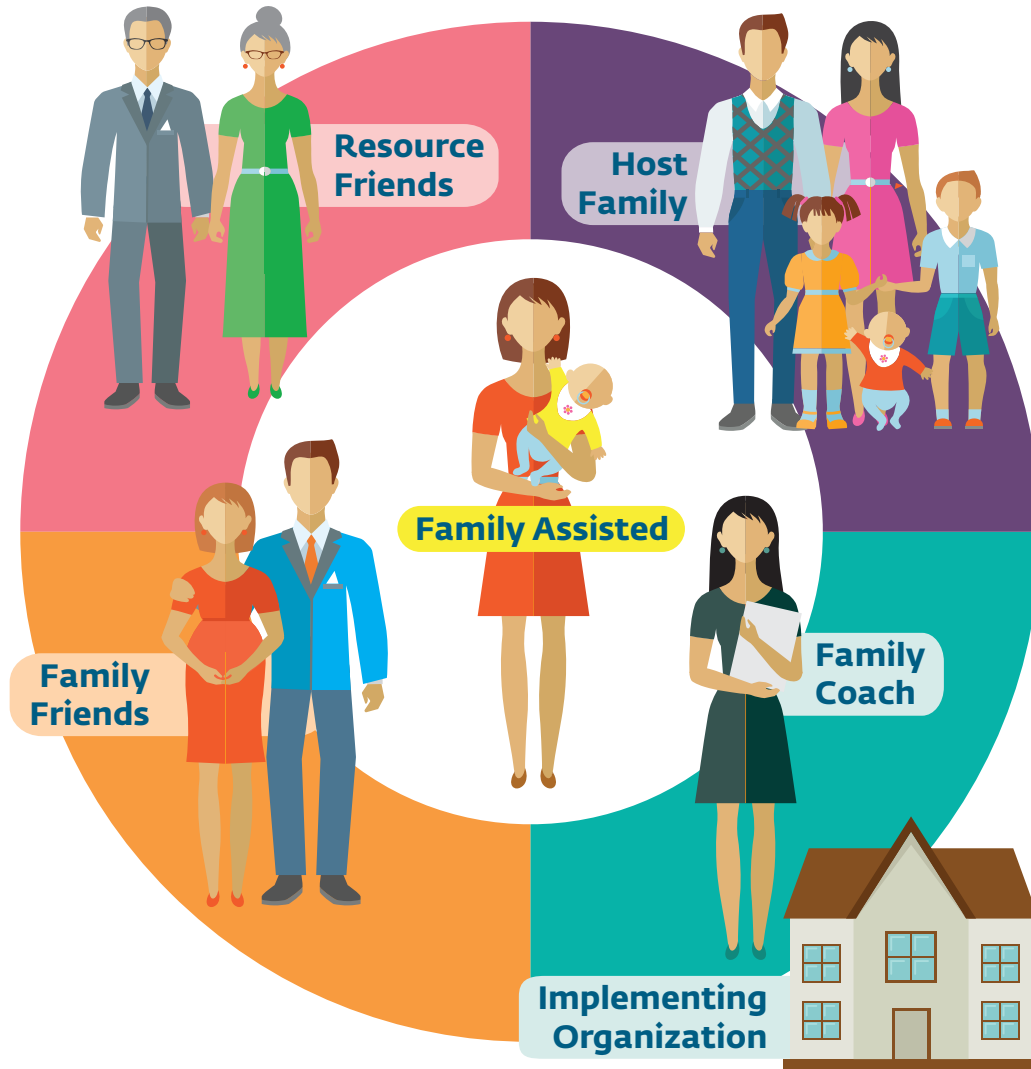
Safe Families organizes in communities primarily through local churches and other non-profits. The program is often overseen by an existing private child welfare agency, which provides the professional resources necessary to ensure the safe and efficient operation of the model.⁴³ That private agency is responsible for recruiting, training, and supporting the volunteers that provide the direct help to families in crisis. This help comes in three forms.

1) Hosting: Families in crisis voluntarily place their children with a fully-screened and trained “Host Family” for a short period of time. The Host Family voluntarily cares for the children while the parent gets the help he or she needs. In all Safe Families hosting arrangements, safe reunification of children with their parents is the primary goal.

2) Befriending: Parents who place their children through Safe Families are also provided social support through friendship and counseling. In addition to providing short-term care for the children of families in crisis, Host Families commit to building a loving and supportive relationship with the parents. Other volunteers, known as “Family Friends,” also commit to befriending the parents of children in care. While Family Friends do not host children, they provide parents with a loving, supportive person to turn to for advice, guidance, and assistance with meeting practical needs such as providing rides to job interviews. Parents also receive assistance from “Case Coaches,” who help facilitate the relationship between the child’s family and the Host Family during the placement. The primary role of the Case Coach is to ensure the well-being of the children and communicate needs and issues to the various parties involved. Finally, professional Safe Families staff oversee all placements and services and provide clinical support for the family served.

3) Resources/Physical Needs: Individual volunteers as well as non-profit organizations in the community commit to helping meet practical needs. These volunteers provide such things as food, household items, toys, and basic childcare needs to both the family seeking help and the Host Family. In many cases, to help the family achieve stability, they will also provide valuable services such as counseling, drug rehabilitation, or assistance finding a job or place to live.

SAFE FAMILIES' MODEL OF CARE



The Safe Families model surrounds the family in crisis with a caring community, with each member focused on meeting specific needs that will achieve the goals of maltreatment prevention, reunification, and long-term stability.

BETTER OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

Since launching in 2002, Safe Families for Children has served nearly 20,000 children in 27 different states at 72 unique sites.⁴⁴ The Safe Families model has been incredibly successful at helping at-risk families achieve stability and reunite families after periods of crisis. To date, 90 percent of all children hosted through Safe Families have been successfully reunified with their biological families.⁴⁵ By comparison, just half of children who enter government-run foster care are ever successfully reunited with their parents or primary caregivers.⁴⁶

Safe Families has also excelled at keeping these crises from escalating. Of the nearly 20,000 children ever hosted by Safe Families, only two percent have needed referrals to government-run child welfare



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agencies.⁴⁷ On the other hand, nearly 20 percent of children who are reunified with their families after spending time in government-run foster care re-enter the system, with nearly eight percent re-entering foster care within twelve months.⁴⁸

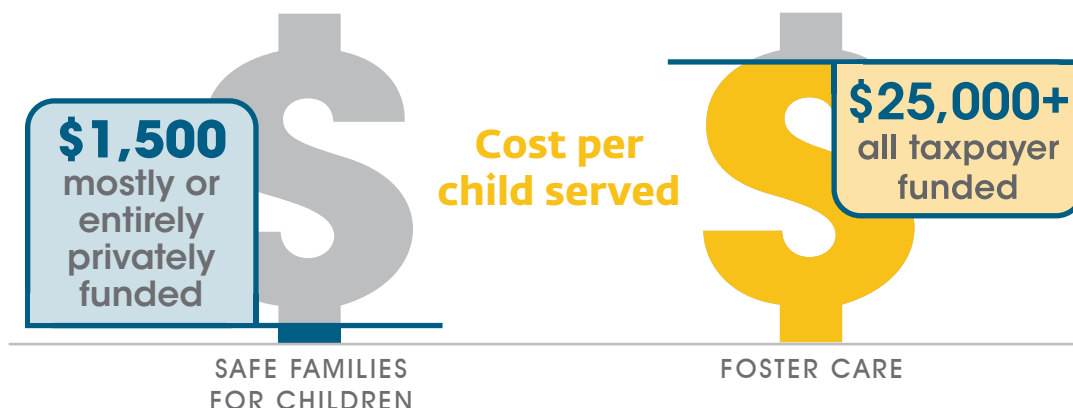
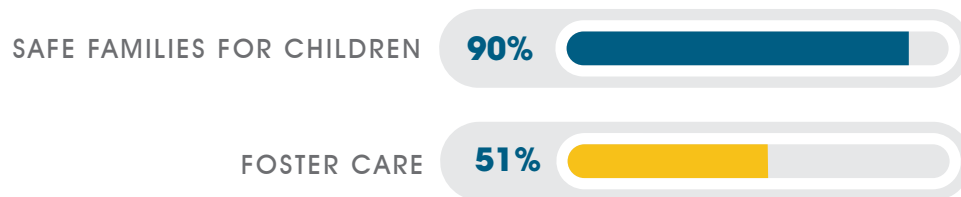
Better still, Safe Families has been able to safely reunify families far faster than government-run foster care. One of the most important measures of success for any service involving the out-of-home placement of children is how quickly that program is able to return the child to his or her original home. Over the last thirteen years, the average length of time that children hosted by Safe Families spent in the care of Host Families is 29 days.⁴⁹ Children removed from their home into government-run foster care, on the other hand, typically spend nearly two years - 23.4 months in an out-of-home placement.⁵⁰

While the most important outcome of Safe Families is helping children realize their basic human right to a safe, stable family, the program can also provide significant cost savings for states. On average, it costs taxpayers around \$25,000 per year to keep just one child in foster care.⁵¹ Safe Families, on the other hand, costs only \$1,500 per child, and is almost entirely privately funded.⁵²

Average length of stay



Percentage of kids that return home



WHAT STATES CAN DO

Safe Families for Children is not only a viable alternative to government-run foster care, its outcomes show that it is more effective at preventing child maltreatment and preserving at-risk families. Based on an analysis of demographic data for Safe Families placements provided by Lydia Home Association and national statistics on child maltreatment and foster care, expanding Safe Families chapters nationwide could potentially help more than 33,300 children per year.⁵³⁻⁵⁷ The ability to help those children, however, requires a strong Safe Families chapter in each state backed by a supportive legal and regulatory environment.

Unfortunately, the reception of the Safe Families model has been mixed among child welfare bureaucracies, with some state bureaucrats resisting the model simply because it exists outside the traditional, government-run system. In these states, bureaucrats have actively blocked the establishment of Safe Families chapters and threatened to close existing branches unless they submit to the control and oversight of the state agencies. This overzealous regulation threatens the effectiveness of the program and tramples on the rights of parents voluntarily seeking help.

Yet, when Safe Families has been allowed to operate independently of, and in conjunction with, state agencies, the results have been incredibly impressive. The Illinois Department of Child and Family Services, for example, enthusiastically embraced the model as an essential partner for the protection of children. Safe Families chapters in Illinois boast a reunification rate of over 81 percent, while less than one percent of children hosted through the program are ever referred to the state.⁵⁸

The ability of Safe Families to serve families in crisis that otherwise would not be reached should spur policymakers toward promoting the program as an essential tool in helping care for the most vulnerable, at-risk children. With more and more government-run child welfare systems facing critical challenges, innovative solutions like Safe Families can be employed to reduce entries into foster care and free up valuable resources to focus on emergency and high-impact cases. Lawmakers should pass legislation making it clear that Safe Families for Children and other community-based solutions are a priority, and rein in overzealous bureaucracies that threaten to stifle or even destroy these safe, effective solutions through overregulation.

Even in states where Safe Families chapters are active, legislative protection for the Safe Families model is key to ensuring that citizens receive the full benefits of the program. States should enact a legal framework for Safe Families that is simple, safe, and encourages families in crisis to seek help before it is too late.

Because Safe Families is a voluntary system designed to intervene before maltreatment occurs, it is important to keep it separate from the states' child welfare agencies. Families experiencing crises understand that these state agencies have the power to terminate their parental rights and are understandably afraid of approaching them for help. In order to protect innovative, community-based solutions like Safe Families, state policymakers must erect a firewall between Safe Families chapters and the state child welfare agency, ensuring that community groups do not simply become another arm of government.

In addition, policymakers should provide affirmative protection to parents who voluntarily seek help through Safe Families by ensuring that those decisions, without any other evidence of maltreatment, cannot be used as evidence of abandonment, abuse or neglect by the courts or state bureaucrats. This protection provides parents with the confidence to seek help without fear, while continuing to allow state agencies and law enforcement to exercise their authority to investigate and appropriately handle allegations of abuse or neglect.

Lawmakers must also clearly distinguish the role of Host Families from that of traditional foster families. Government-run foster care frequently imposes numerous rules on foster families that would impair Safe Families' ability to provide temporary help and strengthen families.



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Government-run foster care, for example, typically limits interactions between parents and foster families. If there is interaction at all, it is generally supervised and often held in government offices. But Safe Families' model hinges on placing families and Host Families developing open, trust-based relationships. These foster care rules create artificial barriers between the two families, making it more difficult to achieve lasting, positive change.

Similarly, unlike traditional foster families, Host Families serve without compensation. For families who are often struggling with financial difficulties, the knowledge that a family is being paid to care for their children can create feelings of resentment and undermine the very support system they are seeking. Allowing Host Families to serve without compensation strengthens those relationships, leading to longer-lasting support for those in need.

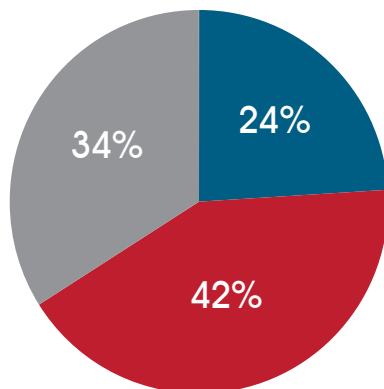
Finally, as is evident from the poll results discussed in the next section, a significant majority of citizens have a desire to help people in their communities who are experiencing hard times, but few are willing to become foster families. If government regulates effective community-based programs like Safe Families into nothing more than "foster care light," then we can expect to see a sharp decrease in the number of families willing to volunteer. By ensuring that a Safe Families placement is functionally distinct from foster care, lawmakers can ensure that they are creating the optimal legal and regulatory environment to promote the success of the program.

ALTERNATIVES TO FOSTER CARE ARE POLITICALLY POPULAR

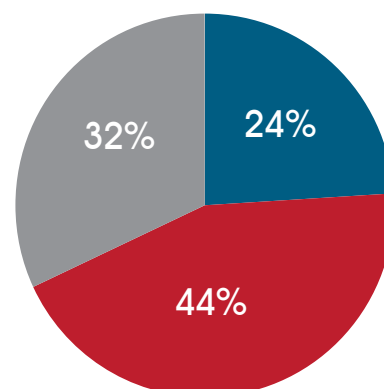
A multi-state poll of voters' opinions on child welfare reform reveals that Americans are disappointed with the existing system, that they support community-based alternatives, and that they are ready to reward policymakers who lay the groundwork for those alternatives.⁵⁹

Fewer than one-quarter of all voters believe that government does a good job of protecting children from abuse or neglect and just 24 percent believe that government-run foster care is an ideal outcome for children dealing with abuse and neglect.⁶⁰

Government does a good job protecting children from abuse and neglect.



Government-run foster care is an ideal outcome for children dealing with abuse and neglect.



● AGREE

● DISAGREE

● NEUTRAL/UNSURE

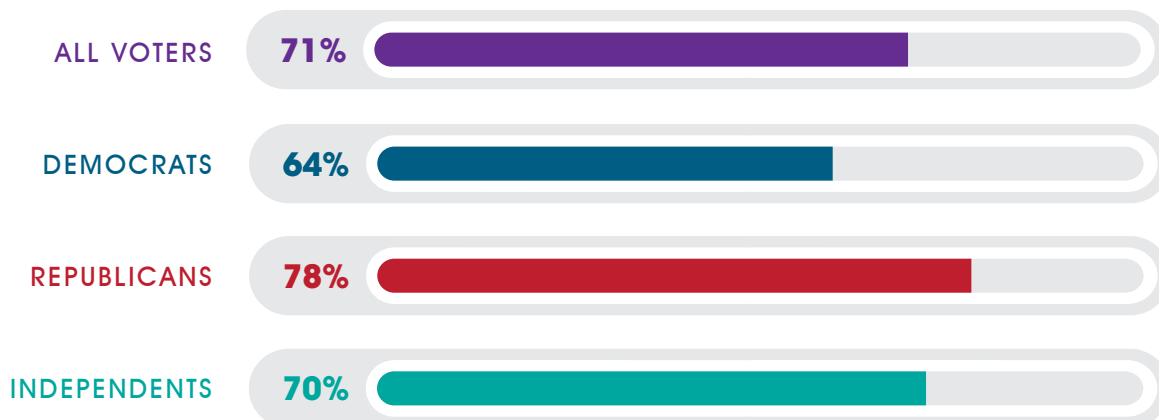
But voters express overwhelming support for private, community organizations that provide care for children and struggling families. An astounding 70 percent of all voters believe that local community organizations, like charities and churches, are better equipped than government to respond to the needs of families and should play a greater role in serving these needs.⁶¹

These opinions extend from the ballot box into their personal lives. When asked where they would turn for help in a time of crisis, nearly three-quarters of voters with children answered that they would seek help from a family member.⁶² Local religious organizations or places of worships were the second most common answer. Just five percent of voters would seek help from government-run child welfare agencies.⁶³

Americans are also ready, willing and able to help others when times get tough. Nearly 70 percent of those surveyed said they would open their home to the child of a friend, family member, or acquaintance who is experiencing hard times.⁶⁴ But while they are eager to help privately, few are willing to entangle their lives with the broken foster care system. Fewer than 14 percent of voters indicated that they were willing to become foster parents.⁶⁵ These results seem to suggest that the spirit of community service is alive and well, but that service is severely dampened when it must be routed through the government.

It is no surprise, then, that voters are supportive of community-based alternatives like Safe Families, regardless of their political affiliations. Indeed, nearly 71 percent of voters report that they are more likely to re-elect state legislators who make it easier for community and faith-based organizations to help kids at risk of going into foster care.⁶⁶

Percentage of voters “more likely” to re-elect their state legislator who supported legislation making it easier for community and faith-based organizations to help kids at-risk of going into foster care





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CONCLUSION

Government-run foster care is failing kids and trapping them in lives of dependency, but there is a better way. Americans are eager to embrace community-based options that allow friends, families, and neighbors to provide each other with the long-lasting support at-risk families so desperately need.

Unfortunately, the legal and regulatory environment in many states is hostile to these options, meaning fewer families get the help they need before situations escalate. Expanding the Safe Families model nationwide could save nearly 33,000 children a year from entering the foster care system. Not only does this provide taxpayers with meaningful savings, it also provides those children with a better, brighter future.

Struggling families and their children deserve better than the status quo. Common-sense legislation that protects children and encourages friends, families, and neighbors to care for one another is an important step in providing those children with better options. By embracing these politically popular reforms, lawmakers can ensure that community-based groups are able to promote safe, more stable families and provide those kids with the brighter future they deserve.

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53. According to federal data, approximately 74 percent of children entering foster care, or roughly 188,198 children each year, do so as a result of neglect. Approximately 60 percent of children entering foster care, or 150,814 children each year, are 8 years old or younger. Together, there are an estimated 112,000 children aged 8 years old or younger who are victims of neglect each year. Based on the experiences in states where Safe Families chapters are active, strong chapters and positive working relationships with state child welfare agencies nationwide could potentially reach 30 percent of these children. This represents a nationwide impact of diverting approximately 33,000 children from foster care each year.
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