



September 18, 2020

The Honorable Sherrod Brown
U.S. Senate
503 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kamala D. Harris
U.S. Senate
112 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Bob Casey
U.S. Senate
393 Russell Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jackie Walorski
U.S. Senate
516 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Catherine Cortez Masto
U.S. Senate
516 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
U.S. Senate
731 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Sheldon Whitehouse
U.S. Senate
530 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Bob Menendez
U.S. Senate
528 Hart Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senators Brown, Harris, Casey, Cortez Masto, Stabenow, Whitehouse, and Menendez,

On behalf of First Focus Campaign for Children, a bipartisan children's advocacy organization dedicated to making children and families the priority in federal policy and budget decisions, we are writing to thank you for your leadership in introducing the Child Welfare Emergency Assistance Act (S. 4172).

There are approximately 3.5 million children who have experienced, or are at risk of, child abuse or neglect. The overlapping crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic recession have exacerbated the opioid epidemic and increased the risk for more children to experience abuse and neglect, which are most often the aftermath of economic and parental stress. The situation facing America's children is complex and we are pleased to see that the Child Welfare Emergency Assistance Act is offering comprehensive support for this vulnerable group of children.

The Child Welfare Emergency Assistance Act will provide emergency federal funding to ensure that state and local child welfare agencies have the resources and flexibility they need during the COVID-19 pandemic to keep children safe, support struggling families, and ensure that foster families, kinship caregivers and other providers have what they need to continue taking care of

children and youth. This legislation is guided by the best interest of children as it recognizes the need to protect children from the pandemic's consequences by supporting kinship caregivers, child protection workers, and older foster youth.

Support for kinship caregivers avoids the disaster of an overwhelmed child welfare system, thereby promoting the chances that vulnerable children will receive quality care and attention from their guardians. Through "family finding" for youth at risk of entering foster care and support for family group decision making, this bill prioritizes the security and emotional health of America's children. As remote interactions become the new normal, vulnerable children must be provided strong, in-person support systems in order to retain a sense of stability and reduce the risk that they will be exposed to trauma.

The Child Welfare Emergency Assistance Act's inclusion of kinship navigator programs will support vital caregivers for millions of children, including children living in foster care. Kinship families are facing countless new challenges amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This legislation aptly empowers kinship caregivers to take on these challenges by increasing their access to food, safety supplies, testing and treatment, technology and technological supports, health care, and legal assistance. These resources will equip caregivers to protect children from physical harm and to reduce the manifold consequences of the pandemic on vulnerable children.

Now is a critical time for assistance to reach the child welfare system. By expanding the ability of caseworkers and other child welfare agency staff to conduct safe, in-person home and family visits through the purchasing of PPE, welfare system staff can expand their ability to protect children and stabilize families. This bill allows for agencies to offer Premium pay for these staff member who conduct home and family visits affirms the value of these front-line workers and enables them to carry out their responsibilities as effectively as possible.

Sections 103 and 202 of the Child Welfare Emergency Assistance Act provide targeted support to meet the unique needs of youth in the child welfare system who cannot rely on family to provide economic or material support during these challenging times. Young people have voiced their struggles to meet their needs met and explained how they have not benefited from the previous relief bills. We are thankful to see that Sections 103 and 202 of the bill respond to the experiences and needs of young people. These sections of the bill address the needs of young people in meaningful ways by increasing Chafee funds by \$500 million and increasing the flexibility of these funds so that these youth can better meet their urgent needs and avoid being forced into homelessness. These sections also provide states the backing they need to act in the best interest of young people.

The stress of the pandemic has been met with highly publicized tragedies of people of color dying during or after interactions with law enforcement. The Child Welfare Emergency Assistance Act will require state child welfare agencies to help remedy this crisis by creating plans to (1) prevent unnecessary interactions between children, youth and families that they work with and police; (2) facilitate collaboration between clinical staff and law enforcement as much as practicable and in so far as it is in the child's best interests; and (3) detects and disallows intimidation or coercion from law enforcement that are involved in child welfare investigations.

We deeply appreciate the way that this provision provides a structural solution to the anxiety and racial stress that so many foster youth and their families experience.

We thank you for recognizing the unique consequences of COVID-19 for children and young people who interact with the child welfare system. Now is the time to invest in the futures of these children by providing their caregivers the necessary equipment to promote their physical health and general wellbeing. Promoting prevention, supporting families with a more robust investment in proven effective child welfare strategies during the pandemic and this economic crisis will generate savings in the health, justice, and social services sectors. We applaud your choice of prudent investments to achieve such morally commendable ends. Childhood has been interrupted by COVID-19. We thank you for your work to restore it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent loop at the end of the last name.

Bruce Lesley,
President