



September 24, 2010

The Honorable Pete Stark
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Stark:

I am writing on behalf of First Focus, a bipartisan advocacy organization committed to making children and their families a priority in federal policy and budget decisions, to thank you for your leadership in introducing the Foster Children Self Support Act. We applaud your efforts to ensure that foster children are able to use their social security and supplemental security income (SSI) benefits to address their needs and ease the transition to adulthood and financial stability.

At present, states can use foster children's social security and SSI benefits to reimburse the cost of providing care to those children. The Foster Children Self Support Act limits the use of social security and SSI benefits for foster care maintenance or other payments. Rather, benefits may be utilized to meet the current and future needs of the child and enable him or her to achieve financial stability after leaving foster care.

Youth often age out of foster care without a place to call home and frequently experience difficulty securing a job. Sadly, the outlook for many of these kids is grim. One in four will be incarcerated within the first two years after leaving the system, and over one-fifth will become homeless at some point. Only 58 percent will obtain a high school degree by age 19 – compared to 87 percent of non-foster kids. These teens are also more likely to experience serious mental health problems and to be involved in the juvenile justice system. SSI eligible foster care youth who leave care often have an even more difficult time transitioning to independent living and may need additional resources that SSI provides. Providing benefits to these teens on leaving care would ease the transition to adulthood at a time when they are expected to become financially independent.

The Foster Children Self Support Act creates a pathway to self sufficiency and financial independence for foster youth. We're pleased that the bill also includes the following provisions:

- *Screening for foster children for eligibility for social security and SSI benefits.* Children in foster care often have a range of unique physical and mental health needs, physical disabilities and developmental delays, far greater than other high-risk populations. Given their health and mental health needs — and the fact that most foster children would be expected to meet the income and resources requirements for SSI or social security receipt — it is possible that at least some foster children who would be eligible for such benefits are not receiving them. Yet not all children in foster care may have been screened for SSI or social security benefits eligibility. Screening for eligibility will ensure that children who are eligible for benefits can access these critical resources.
- *Management of social security and SSI benefits for foster children.* This provision will require a plan, developed specifically for the child, which is designed to best meet the current and future needs of the child and enable the child to achieve self-support after leaving foster care.

We are grateful for your leadership on this issue, and for all of your efforts to ensure the health and well-being of our nation's most vulnerable children. Thank you again, and we look forward to working with you on this and other proposals.

Sincerely,

Bruce Lesley



President