

October 11, 2011

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

Dear Congressman Stark:

We are writing to thank you for your leadership on and continued attention to the needs of America's children, and to express our support for the Foster Children Opportunity Act. As representatives of organizations committed to improving the health and well-being of children and families, we are pleased that the Foster Children Opportunity Act seeks to ensure that abused and neglected immigrant children have an opportunity to obtain the legal immigrant status to which they are entitled prior to aging out of the foster care system.

Immigrant children involved in the child welfare system are often eligible for special forms of immigration relief, including Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) but early identification is critical given that a child can lose SIJS eligibility once the court terminates jurisdiction over the youth. More often than not, court and child welfare officials are unaware of immigration relief options available, leaving these children at risk of deportation at any time and drastically limiting their educational and work opportunities when they "age out" of the system.

Sadly, each year, many undocumented children age out of the child welfare system without the opportunity to obtain legal immigrant status. On exiting the system, they often lose their only chance to gain legal status and leave the foster care system in a state of limbo, lacking the lawful status necessary to succeed in the U.S. They face a daily risk of deportation, are unable to obtain employment authorization, a driver's license, access to benefits and in most states, are not eligible for in-state tuition at state colleges and universities.

Child welfare staff, judges, attorneys and other service providers play a critical role in the lives of these young people. It is essential that they are knowledgeable about immigration issues and SIJS in particular, and has access to the training and resources necessary to fully protect all children in its care.

The Foster Children Opportunity Act aims to ensure that all children in the foster care system are screened for SIJS and other immigration relief options. The bill provides needed technical assistance to child welfare agencies and resources to train judges, attorneys and other legal workers on this matter. It also clarifies that a state can obtain reimbursement for the foster care costs of a child once the child obtains SIJS status and ensures that children who receive SIJS are exempted from the 5 year ban placed on receiving Federal means-tested public benefits.

This Act seeks to protect abused and neglected children by ensuring they have a fighting chance at leading healthy and productive lives when they exit the child welfare system. We are grateful for your leadership in introducing the Foster Children Opportunity Act, and we look forward to working with you to ensure passage of this critical legislation.

Sincerely,

Action for Children North Carolina
Advocates for Children and Youth
American Humane Association

America's Promise Alliance
Arkansas Voices for Children Left Behind
Arizona Council of Human Services Providers
Asian American Justice Center, Member of the Asian American Center for Advancing Justice
California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation
Casa Esperanza
Center for Public Policy Priorities
Child Welfare League of America (CWLA)
Children First for Oregon
Children's Action Alliance
Children's Advocacy Institute
Children's Home Society of NC
Children's Law Center of Los Angeles
Community Action Partnership
Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption
ECPAT-USA
First Focus Campaign for Children
Florida Equal Justice Center
Foster Family-Based Treatment Association
Georgia Rural Urban Summit
Global Family Legal Services
Gulfcoast Legal Services, Inc.
Human Rights Initiative of North Texas
Immigrant Legal Resource Center
Juvenile Law Center
Kids In Need of Defense (KIND)
Larkin Street Youth Services
LatinoJustice PRLDEF
Latinos for Education & Justice Organization, Inc
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Maine Children's Alliance
Maternal and Child Health Access
Medical Legal Partnership at Florida State University College of Law
Mental Health America
Michigan State University College of Law Immigration Law Clinic
Michigan's Children

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth
National CASA Association
National Council of La Raza (NCLR)
National Immigrant Justice Center
National Immigration Law Center
National Policy Partnership for Children of Incarcerated Parents
New Mexico Voices for Children
New Mexico Women's Justice Project
Northwest Immigrant Rights Project
Our Bodies Ourselves
PB&J Family Services, Inc, Albuquerque New Mexico
Pegasus Legal Services for Children
Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children
Project IRENE
Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law
SC Appleseed Legal Justice Center
School Social Work Association of America
STANDUP FOR KIDS
Statewide Parent Advocacy Network of New Jersey
Sue Cares
TASH
Texans Care for Children
The Children's Partnership
The Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc.
The National Center for Adoption Law & Policy
The National Center for Lesbian Rights
The New Mexico Council on Crime and Delinquency
U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
Voices for America's Children
Voices for Utah Children
Voices for Virginia's Children
Woman's Foundation of California
Women of Reform Judaism
Women's Refugee Commission

Youth Law Center