



**HELP AMERICAN FOSTER CHILDREN SUCCEED
(AND ESPECIALLY THOSE IN OUR OWN BACKYARDS!)
A Presentation to the Rotary Club of Washington, D.C.
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I'm greatly honored to be with this distinguished Rotary Club in our Nation's Capital, and especially during National Foster Care Month. We applaud and support your complementary Rotary International theme for May: "New Generations/Youth Services. Accordingly, my goal today is to empower each of you, should you be so inclined, to utilize your influential voices and powerful connections to "HELP AMERICAN FOSTER CHILDREN SUCCEED (AND ESPECIALLY THOSE IN OUR OWN BACKYARDS!)"

Since 1988, some 30 years ago, when President Ronald Reagan issued the first Presidential Proclamation establishing May as National Foster Month, Presidents from both sides of the aisle have supported this tradition.

This year's proclamation issued by the White House calls upon "all Americans to observe this month by taking time to help children and youth in foster care, and to recognize the commitment of those who touch their lives, particularly celebrating their foster parents and caregivers."

As someone blessed to have been adopted, or "chosen" as my wonderful parents were proud to say, I'm deeply honored to have this opportunity to share the challenges that the National Council For Adoption (NCFA) faces in helping the growing number of children in America—and in our own backyards—who are languishing in foster care. As a non-profit organization serving children and families for almost 40 years, NCFA's vision is that the 125,000 waiting children in foster care and tens of thousands of orphans globally will be adopted into a "forever home" where they will be able to enjoy their "human right to family."

Today, I want to share 3 key considerations with you: 1. What factors are contributing to the growing number of children in foster care? 2. What is the impact of "aging out" for the 20,000 youth who were *not* adopted last year? And 3, in conclusion, what can you do as individuals to, as we like to say, become "champions for adoptions out of foster care" and support adoption in all its forms?

First, let me define foster care. It is temporary, out-of-home care which is provided by states for children who cannot live with their families, and includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child

care institutions, and pre-adoptive homes. In federal fiscal year 2017, there were 443,000 children in foster care. While the case plan goal varies for each individual child, *adoption* is the end goal for about 28% of these children.

In the early 2000's, there were over a half a million (540,000) American children in foster care. The number of children in foster care would go on to see an encouraging decade of decline, reaching a 20-year low in 2012, when just under 400,000 children were in care. We can attribute that decade of improvement to (among many factors) more pro-adoption legislation and increased funding, both Federal and State, plus greater personal focus on adoption by State Officials who are responsible for foster care. But beginning in 2012, that promising trend began to reverse, increasing 12% over the past 5 years. Even more troubling, those "Waiting For Adoption", increased at nearly double that rate (23 %) to 123,437 in 2017, up from a low of 100,379.

Why? Let's examine why children enter foster care and what has changed in recent years. The Children's Bureau tracks in their annual report the circumstances associated with each child's removal from their home. For the most part, children are removed due to parental neglect (62%), with many children also experiencing a caretaker's inability to cope (14%) or physical abuse (12%). In 2015, the Children's Bureau added the category of **parental drug abuse** to their report, which has documented a steady increase in parental drug abuse cases every year, now affecting 36% of children entering care. NCFCA has seen over the years how the Opioid Epidemic is ravaging families, resulting in tens of thousands of children being removed from their homes every year.

Scientists suggest that the opioid epidemic began in 1991, entered its second wave in 2010 (with increased deaths from heroin abuse), and quickly entered its third wave in 2013 (with increasing deaths from synthetic opioids like "fentanyl"). It is more than coincidental that the increase in children entering care over the past five years coincides with an increased trend in opioid use. Trauma of *all* forms leaves a tragic, lifelong impact on children, and it is troubling to see parental opioid abuse rising at such staggering rates.

So, with many concerns at the national level, what is the state of foster care in our own backyards? Here in the Nation's Capital, and neighboring Maryland and Virginia, just under 10,000 children are currently in foster care. Perhaps you'll be surprised, and rightfully proud, that both D.C. and Maryland have *not* seen an increase in children in foster care; in fact, they have continued to work toward *reducing* the number of children in care. Over the past 5 years, the number of foster children in D.C. declined nearly 40% (38% to 751) and 20% (to 3,923) in Maryland. Unfortunately, the number of children in Virginia's foster care system rose slightly by 5% (to 4,795) in that time, but that was much less than the national increase of 12% (to 443,000).

While that's some encouraging progress **in our local region**, we cannot rest until **every child in America** enjoys their human right to family. Not only because these children deserve a "forever home" where they can thrive, but also because the social and economic costs of failing to place these children into

families are high. Nearly 20,000 young people in America “age out” of the foster care system each year at age 18 (or age 21 in half the States, including DC, Maryland, and Virginia).

Because we equate age 18 with adulthood (eligible to vote, join the military, and “normal” high school graduation), many think that young adults should be mature enough to exit foster care at that age. To the contrary however, the situation for youth in foster care at 18—or even 21—is vastly different than for the average American. Let’s try to “**walk in their shoes,**” as I wrote in NCFA’s monthly publication, the “**Adoption Advocate,**” during National Foster Care Month in May 2015 in a piece entitled “**The Human, Social, and Economic Cost of Aging Out of Foster Care.**”

For those of us fortunate enough to grow up in a stable home, with caring and financially secure parents, becoming independent at 18 might sound like a normal transition to adulthood. As “graduating seniors,” we looked forward to charting our own paths, secure in the knowledge that we had little chance of failure. Why? Because we were comforted that our parents, friends, and relatives would always be there for us. Our futures seemed assured! Why not join the Peace Corps, take a trip around the world, or just time off to “find ourselves” while you decide which university you really want to attend?

But try to imagine yourself as an 18-year-old, just aging out of foster care, a system you had entered 2 to 5 years earlier. Perhaps because your parents had abandoned you, struggled with addiction, became incarcerated, or had abused you to the point that, for your own safety and protection, you had essentially become a ward of the State. During those challenging years in foster care, you had probably lived with several different families, but were never adopted, and thus truly felt unwanted. Changing foster homes often meant changing school districts, perhaps mid-semester, leaving you with educational instability and probably lost or incomplete school records. Hence, at 18, you might only be a sophomore or junior in high school. Or, you likely have become discouraged and dropped out!

Many of your essential documents, like your original birth certificate (if you had one!), and your Social Security, school and health records, etc. were probably lost. Thus being “**undocumented**” at 18, you couldn’t enroll for the GED or take college entrance exams (if you’d graduated from high school), rent an apartment or car, travel by airplane, apply for credit, or complete any number of activities required as a young adult. There’s no stint in the Peace Corps in your future, or the time you need to “find yourself” and decide which university you want to attend, probably because you couldn’t even apply. Aging out, or “emancipation” is certainly not *freedom*, instead it is a nightmare.

The outcomes for emancipated youth have been well documented, and especially by Rita Soronen, President and CEO of the Dave Thomas Foundation, who writes:

“Considering the trauma these children have endured at a young age, the moves from foster family to foster family and the abandonment they feel, it’s no wonder they are at a high risk for

a grim future. Conservative studies find one in five will become homeless after 18; at 24, only half will be employed; less than 3% will have earned a college degree; 71% of women will be pregnant by 21; and one in four will have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder at twice the rate of United States war veterans. And too often many are at risk of moving back into government systems—from juvenile centers to prison.”

When these young people suffer, society suffers with them. And there are huge losses to our economy when their productivity is far below their peers. The disparities in education are both alarming and costly. Education is an investment in a nation’s “human capital,” so when youth drop out of school, or fail to reach their educational and career earning potential, society as a whole loses. To estimate the impact, my analysis in 2015 found that if youth aging out of foster care achieved the same level of high school and college education as their peers, as well as the same lifetime earnings, they would add **\$40 billion** to the US economy.

Helping foster youth succeed is not just good social policy, it is good economic policy as well. Fortunately, in October 2010, Congress implemented the “Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act,” extending eligibility for federal matching payments to states from age 18 to 21. To date, a slight majority of states have realized that the savings from giving our foster youth three more years of support, as they attain their potential, far exceed the costs of those programs. A real economic “win-win.” And more importantly for the youth, they get a “second chance” to be adopted into a permanent “forever home.”

All foster care youth in America deserve a chance to thrive. So you might ask: What can *you* do as individuals to use your influence and connections to help them succeed?

Adoption—and the safety, permanency, and nurturing environment it provides—is clearly the best outcome for so many youth in foster care. Each of you can use your voices to help America’s foster children succeed, and here are four recommendations:

1. Given that the “drug epidemic” is a contributing factor in increasing the number of American children entering foster care, we must challenge our elected officials to deal with this crisis that is destroying U.S. families. You can help increase public awareness that parental drug abuse is a trauma impacting far too many children, leading them into a series of temporary homes in a public foster care system that is often too burdened to adequately meet their needs.
2. All children in care who aren’t adopted by age 18 deserve a “second chance.” D.C., Virginia, and Maryland have taken the lead in providing matching funds to age 21, so you are in a strong and credible position to encourage your contacts in other states to do so as well. A key “selling point” is the long-term cost savings for states and taxpayers, in addition to the obvious benefit of providing these young people with life-sustaining skills.

My next two recommendations were identified by NCFCA’s Task Force on Foster Care as critical factors for improving the adoption rates out of foster care.

3. Challenge all governors and policy makers to become “champions for adoption out of foster care.” We believe that when state leaders make adoption a “personal priority,” they can have a tremendous impact that reaches far beyond the dollars spent. D.C., Maryland, Virginia, and many other states have shown that once leaders personally take an interest and set challenging (yet reasonable and attainable) placement goals, the highly dedicated officials responsible for foster care will do their utmost to implement effective programs and achieve results.
4. Finally, you can encourage the other organizations you are a part of, and especially faith-based ones, to form partnerships with the public foster care system to advocate for adoption out of foster care and increase public awareness. These public-private partnerships can stretch or save public funds, and more importantly, help find families for foster youth!

At National Council For Adoption, we welcome your ideas on how we can all help American foster children succeed. As the authoritative voice for adoption, NCFA is fully prepared to expand its partnerships to pursue all of these goals and recommendations. Together with your powerful voices, we can reach the noble goal of finding loving, safe “forever homes” for all children in need of a family. And eventually, achieve our long sought after vision of ending the need for foster care by also helping families succeed.

APPENDIX: TRENDS IN FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION¹

	FY2008	FY2012	FY2017	Percentage change	
				2008-17	2012-17
NUMBERS IN FOSTER CARE					
Washington, D.C.	2,217	1,216	751	-66 %	-38 %
Maryland	7,613	4,884	3,923	-48 %	-20 %
Virginia	7,099	4,579	4,795	-32 %	+5 %
Regional Total	16,929	10,679	9,469	-44 %	-11 %
United States	463,074	396,414	442,995	-4 %	+12 %
 WAITING FOR ADOPTION					
Washington, D.C.	493	313	190	-61 %	-40 %
Maryland	1,506	559	481	-68 %	-14 %
Virginia	1,769	1,519	1,826	+3 %	+20 %
Regional Total	3,768	2,391	2,497	-34 %	+4 %
United States	125,388	100,379	123,437	-2 %	+23 %
 ADOPTED FROM CARE					
Washington, D.C.	113	114	91	-19 %	-20 %
Maryland	610	455	348	-43 %	-24 %
Virginia	664	639	801	+21 %	+25 %
Regional Total	1,387	1,208	1,240	-11%	+3 %
United States	55,264	52,025	59,430	+8 %	+14 %

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), FY2017 Report (published August 10, 2018)

Adoption From Foster Care

Foster Care in the U.S. ¹

- **442,995** youth in foster care, with a median age of 7.7 years
- 123,437 **waiting** to be adopted.
- **19,945** youth aged out (emancipated) of the system last year

Foster Care & Emancipation = Grim Results ^{2,3}

- 42% **drop out** of high school
- 40% experience **homelessness** after emancipation
- 4% graduate college
- 71% of women will be pregnant **by age 21**
- 50% will **never** obtain employment
- 15% will experience **PTSD**
- 25% become **incarcerated** (costs \$136 million per year)
- Keeping a child in foster care for one year costs \$15,000, or 300% more than adopting from foster care

It's Time For Action

We must find families for the 123,437 foster children eligible for adoption

- The families are out there⁴:
 - 25% of US adults are **interested in adopting**
 - 79% of those consider adoption from foster care

Where Are We Seeing Success?

- Governors and legislatures who have **made adoption and foster care a priority** have seen demonstrable success at improving outcomes for foster children in their states.
- Virginia matched **1000 children** with adoptive families in just **11 months** by identifying adoptive parents among relatives and family friends.)³
- Increasing the age of foster care assistance from **18 to 21 has been shown to improve the** likelihood of adoption or support to adulthood, reduces teen pregnancies, and doubles chance of earning college degrees.
- Private organizations are finding innovative solutions, like AdoptUSKids, which works with agencies to provide photolisting services and has helped to place **almost 32,000 children**

¹ HHS Data for 2018: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport24.pdf>

² <https://www.davethomasfoundation.org/we-are-abandoning-children-in-foster-care/>

³ Adoption Advocate No. 83 May, 2015 available at www.adoptioncouncil.org

⁴ Dave Thomas Foundation 2017 Adoption Attitudes Survey US