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ON GOVERNMENT'S SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Congress must step up to help foster youth

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What dreams do we have for our children? What future do we seek to chart for them? What supports do we endeavor to give them as they transition into adulthood?

When we address these straightforward questions for our own children, all of the complexities of reforming the nation's beleaguered foster care system disappear. The answers are self-evident. We want our children to have a good education, a stable, loving environment, and the opportunity to grow into healthy young adults.

Our nation's foster children deserve no less.

While millions of Americans obsess about gas prices, baseball rankings, or the latest celebrity scandal, our most vulnerable children have taken a back seat. Fortunately, there is still time for Congress to take action on pending legislation and make a real difference in the lives of America's foster youth - by extending foster care support to age 21.

Every year, more than 24,000 young Americans "age out" from the foster care system when they turn 18 and are no longer eligible for assistance. Without the anchor of a family, foster youth do not fare well as young adults, disproportionately joining the ranks of the homeless, incarcerated and unemployed.

Supporting foster youth until age 21 isn't just compassionate, it makes sense. A recent study compared outcomes for youth who remained in foster care past age 18 with those who left on their 18th birthday. The results were conclusive; youth who are allowed to remain in foster care beyond age 18 were:

-- Two times more likely to be working toward completion of a high school diploma.

-- Three times more likely to be in college.

-- More likely to be insured and have better mental health.

-- Far less likely to be victims or perpetrators of crime and violence.

Extending foster care support until age 21 also prevents crime and reduces the costs of law enforcement, including the expense of incarceration. A 2007 study from the University of Chicago concluded that former foster youth are 10 times more likely to be arrested than youth of the same age, race and sex. According to the California Budget Project, the associated costs of these prosecutions are considerable, with the per capita cost of adult incarceration in California in 2006 reaching \$43,287 annually.

Given the ongoing crisis in the California prison system, supporting foster youth until 21 is both a smart and humane way to stem the flow of youth into the adult criminal system.

The pending federal legislative package would also increase federal support for family members who take in abused or neglected relatives, improve oversight of foster youth health and education, and enhance connections among siblings. Each of these approaches has a measurable positive impact on the lives of foster youth and the people who take care of them. And these reforms are cost neutral - paid for through anti-fraud and other good government provisions that have bipartisan support.

The question now is whether the needs of our nation's most vulnerable children

can capture the attention of Congress.

Representatives Jim McDermott, D-Wash., and Jerry Weller, R-Ill., have introduced the Fostering Connections to Success Act, which passed unanimously out of the House on June 24 and will enact each of the important changes outlined above. Senator Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, has also introduced major child welfare legislation in the Senate, the Improved Adoption Incentives and Relative Guardianship Support Act of 2008.

The Senate Finance Committee will consider these bills before the end of July. The Senate should move these reforms forward and promote a new federal landscape that supports foster youth as they transition to adulthood.

Without action by Congress, these reforms simply will not happen. For every 50 cents California and its counties contribute to the foster care system, the federal government pays the other half.

We cannot have two standards: one for our own children and another for the 500,000 children and youth in foster care. All Americans, Republican and Democrat, agree that children are our most precious resource and deserve our protection, assistance and guidance. We urge the Senate to deliver on that vision and pass pending legislation that would extend support for youth in foster care to age 21.

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