

Child Welfare Emergency Assistance Act

Introduced by Senators Brown, Harris, Casey, and Cortez Masto

The COVID-19 public health emergency has devastated communities, leaving families mourning the loss of loved ones and vulnerable children without caregivers. The unprecedented financial stress, social isolation, and abrupt changes to daily life necessary to preserve health and safety will require additional support for children and families. In the midst of a national health crisis, we must protect the more than 400,000 young people in foster care and ensure young people do not age out of foster care in the middle of this crisis, increasing the likelihood they will experience homelessness. Without swift interventions, pervasive systemic child welfare challenges—including the overrepresentation of children of color, economic uncertainty for kinship caregivers and older youth, caseworker recruitment and retention, as well as poverty-driven calls for help—will only get worse.

The Child Welfare Emergency Assistance Act would provide flexible, emergency aid for key child welfare programs to help stabilize children, young people, and families in crisis, while encouraging communities to work in partnership with and learn from people with relevant lived experiences. The legislation would:

Invest in the health, safety, and wellbeing of children, youth, and families

- Provide \$2 billion to enable state and tribal child welfare agencies to provide families, kinship caregivers, and young people with a broad range of support services, including assistance for transportation, housing, and utility payments. Welfare agencies could also use this funding to expand adoption promotion and support services, or to hire, train and support caseworkers to conduct safe in-person home and remote visits, including the purchase of personal protective equipment and technology.
- Provide \$30 million for kinship navigator programs to ensure kinship caregivers have access to information and resources, including food, safety supplies, technology, and COVID-19 testing.
- Dedicate \$50 million to help states implement health oversight and coordination plans to ensure children in foster care are up-to-date on vaccinations and have access to needed care and telehealth services.
- Provide \$15 million to states and tribes for training on trauma-informed de-escalation strategies for child welfare partners, congregate care facilities, and families.
- Require states to develop and implement de-escalation strategies to limit unnecessary involvement with law enforcement, and ensure any contact with law enforcement is non-coercive.
- Expedite eligibility for children living with a relative in foster care for federal support, and allow 100% federal support for kinship caregiver payments through the Title IV-E Guardianship Assistance Program and kinship-related Title IV-E adoption assistance payments.
- Provide \$500 million for the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program to ensure young people have access to supports, such as housing, food, and cash assistance, and allow more of these funds to cover housing costs for foster youth. Funds could also be used for education and training vouchers, which help young people cover the cost of education.
- Establish a moratorium on “aging out” of foster care to ensure no young person is cut off from critical housing and support services during the public health emergency.

Increase support for services to prevent foster care and the ability of courts to serve families

- Increase federal support to provide Title IV-E Family First prevention services, such as parent training, family counseling, and substance use disorder treatment.
- Provide \$30 million for the Court Improvement Program to ensure dependency courts have resources to facilitate the transition to remote hearings, train judges, volunteers, and court personnel on the use of technology, and support innovative programs to help families continue to address case plan requirements.

The legislation is supported by: Child Welfare League of America, Children’s Defense Fund, American Academy of Pediatrics, Generations United, National Center for Housing & Child Welfare, ACTION Ohio, OHIO Youth Advisory Board, Ohio Grandparent Kinship Coalition, Ohio Federation for Health Equity and Social Justice, and FosterClub.