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Press_Office@finance-rep.senate.gov

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Grassley makes progress on legislation to help foster care kids get permanent, loving homes

WASHINGTON — Senator Chuck Grassley said today that his legislation to help move kids in foster care to permanent home is scheduled for consideration on Friday by the Senate Committee on Finance. Grassley urged congressional leaders to find a way to achieve final passage of the legislation before the end of this year's session.

“This bill is about giving hope and opportunity to some of the most vulnerable kids in the country,” Grassley said. “Today, 15,000 children could leave foster care for good and enjoy the security and stability of a permanent home if we provided federal assistance to their legal guardians who are also their relatives, and that’s just one aspect of this comprehensive legislation.”

Grassley’s bill – the Adoption Assistance and Relative Guardianship Support Act of 2008 – was introduced in May and has been endorsed by the Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, the Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now campaign sponsored by The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Child Welfare League of America, the National Foster Care Coalition, the North American Council on Adoptable Children, and the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption.

Grassley marked introduction of the bill in May by hosting foster care children and families from Iowa at an event on Capitol Hill to promote adoption initiatives for foster care kids.

The pending legislation promotes adoptions by reauthorizing and improving the adoption incentive program and by phasing in federal adoption assistance available to all children in foster care who have special needs. It also builds on the success of federal waivers and state experience establishing permanent homes for foster children by supporting legal relative guardianships. And, it creates a state option to support legal relative guardians for children for whom courts have ruled out adoption and the chance to return home to their birth parents.

Grassley is the Ranking Member of the Senate Committee on Finance, which is responsible for social welfare legislation including adoption policies.

Below is the text of the news release issued in May, which includes a summary of the legislation, S.3038.

For Immediate Release
Tuesday, May 20, 2008

Adoptive parents and children urge passage of Grassley legislation
Iowa senator works to move more children from foster care to permanent homes

WASHINGTON – Senator Chuck Grassley marked National Foster Care Month by introducing legislation today that would help children with special needs in foster care get placed in safe, permanent and loving homes.

Grassley said the “Improved Adoption Incentives and Relative Guardianship Support Act of 2008” builds on the success of previous initiatives to reauthorize the Safe and Stable Families Act of 1997. The 1997 law created the Adoption Incentive Program which needs to be reauthorized this year. It has increased the number of adoptions of children in foster care each year, though Grassley said that number has leveled in many states and new incentives are needed to continue the important gains in permanent placement.

Families from Des Moines, Waverly, Iowa City, Ankeny and Cedar Rapids, Iowa, joined Grassley at a news conference this morning to share their experiences with special needs adoption and express their support for the new legislation.

“These parents are extraordinary for their commitment to children. Few things are as powerful as the desire of children in foster care for a safe and permanent home. Together, they have built loving families that are an inspiration for all of us,” Grassley said. The senator said his new legislation recognizes that public policy ought to encourage and foster more adoptions for everyone’s benefit, especially children.

Parents participating in today’s event were: Alissa Tschetter-Siedschlaw of Des Moines, Adairienne and Jerry Burrow of Waverly, Jackie Hammers-Crowell of Iowa City, Cheryl and Chris McCoy of Ankeny, Andrea Moyer of Des Moines, and Erica Zito of Cedar Rapids.

In 2005, over 900 children in Iowa’s foster care system were adopted. Today, 9,040 children in Iowa are in foster care and 1,432 of them are eligible for adoption. Nationwide, more than 500,000 children are in foster care and 127,000 of them are eligible for placement in a permanent home.

Grassley’s new bill would increase payments to states for finalizing adoptions for children with special needs, create an additional payment for states that exceed the state’s highest rate of all adoptions from foster care, make all children with special needs eligible for federal adoption assistance (current law limits assistance to children removed from very low income families), and establish a new pathway for permanence by allowing states to receive federal reimbursement for payments made to relatives who are legal guardians and are caring for children who would otherwise be in foster care.

The Improved Adoption Incentives and Relative Guardianship Support Act has been endorsed by the Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, the Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now campaign sponsored by The Pew Charitable Trusts, the North American Council on Adoptable Children, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, and the National Foster Care Coalition. Letters of support from these organizations are posted with this news release at <http://grassley.senate.gov> and <http://finance.senate.gov>.

Grassley has long advocated changes to public policy that promote adoption and match children in foster care with safe, permanent and loving families. He co-authored the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, which established the Adoption Incentive Program. He authored provisions in the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 that increased the federal funding stream for programs designed to help keep troubled families together, improve child support collection and distribution, boost direct child support payments, and promote responsible fatherhood and health marriages. Senator Grassley also worked to secure federal funding for grants to train judges, attorneys and legal personnel in child welfare cases. He has protected federal funding for Social Services Block Grants that help fund child welfare services.

In 2001, as Chairman of the tax-writing committee in the Senate, Senator Grassley sponsored tax incentives that promote adoptions. Also in 2006, Senator Grassley convened the first Finance Committee hearing on child welfare in over a decade and co-authored the Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006, which included reauthorization of the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Act, improvements in state child welfare systems and establishment of a monthly caseworker standard.

Highlights

of the Improved Adoption Incentives and Relative Guardianship Support Act of 2008

Adoption Improvements

- Extension and re-basing of the Adoption Incentive Program
- Extends through 2013
- Establishes a new base year (2007) for the Adoption Incentive program - this is needed because after a significant initial increase in adoptions, a number of states can no longer receive the incentive.
- Increases payments to states for finalizing adoptions, exceeding the number in 2007, of children in foster care, with payments targeted toward adoptions of special needs children as defined by the state ages 9 and younger and children over age 9.
- Creates an additional payment for states that exceed the state's highest rate of all adoptions from foster care.
- De-link eligibility for Adoption Assistance, making all children with special needs

eligible for federal adoption assistance. Under current law, only children removed from families meeting the 1996 AFDC income standard are eligible for adoption assistance, resulting in a steady erosion of federal support of adoptions of special needs children.

Improved Permanency Options

Relative Guardianship Support

- Establishes a new pathway for permanence by allowing states to receive federal reimbursement for payments made to legal relative guardians caring for children who would otherwise be in foster care. For these children, courts have already ruled out reunification and adoption.
- Establishes a broad range of information and notification requirements for relatives once a child has been placed in care.
- Allows unobligated funds from the Adoption Incentive program to be made available to states that adopt the Relative Guardianship option and successfully help children leave foster care for permanent homes with relatives.