

First Lady of Virginia: Children Need Permanent Families

By ANNE HOLTON | Richmond Times-Dispatch

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As a judge in Virginia's juvenile and domestic relations courts, and in my work with young people as Virginia's first lady, I have witnessed the importance of the love and support of stable, lifelong families for all children and youth in foster care.

Although foster care is intended as a short-term refuge for children who cannot remain safely in their own homes, too often it becomes a long-term arrangement. Children currently in foster care have spent an average of more than two years of their lives there, and lived in three different placements. Young people who have experienced abuse or neglect need a variety of services and supports -- but what they need most are safe, permanent families.

Regrettably, a successful federal program that has helped hundreds of thousands of children and youth across the U.S. leave foster care for permanent families through adoption is in danger. The federal Adoption Incentive Program, first enacted more than a decade ago as part of the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, is set to expire in September of this year unless Congress acts soon. Recently, the House of Representatives unanimously passed a bipartisan proposal that would extend the Adoption Incentive Program and reform other aspects of our nation's federal foster care system.

The Fostering Connections to Success Act, introduced by Reps. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.) and Jerry Weller (R-Ill.), contains several other important reforms that would help more children in foster care find permanent families and have better long-term outcomes. The bill would help children leave foster care for safe, permanent guardianship placements with relatives who have demonstrated the interest and ability to care for them. It would, for the first time, provide Indian tribes with direct access to federal foster care funds so that they can develop their own foster care programs and keep more American Indian children within their communities. It improves training opportunities for private agencies, and requires greater coordination of education and health planning for foster children. And, it would extend foster care, at the option of states, from age 18 to age 21 for young people still in school or in employment programs, so that young adults would have guidance and support during those crucial years.

MY GOAL AS first lady is to help ensure that all of Virginia's young people have safe, permanent family connections and the community support to sustain them. Through my For Keeps Initiative, I am working with human service agencies, private organizations, and individuals to partner collaboratively and make this vision a reality for Virginia's children and youth in foster care. Not surprisingly, young people who age out of foster care at age 18 or beyond without a permanent family are at high risk of becoming homeless, incarcerated, and/or under-employed. As we all instinctively know, everyone needs family, and those who lack it are less likely to become successful adults and eventually good parents to their own children.

Marthe Lewis is an advocate for youth transitioning from foster care who entered Virginia's foster care system at age 16. A gifted student, she completed high school in only three years, despite the fact that she lived in five different placements and attended three different high schools. In 2000, Lewis "aged out" of foster care with no permanent family.

Against the odds, Lewis completed an undergraduate degree and is now pursuing an MBA degree in finance. She is now an accomplished motivational speaker and a member of Foster Care Alumni of America. I am very moved by something Lewis says when she speaks about the challenges of aging out of foster care: "Without a family, holidays are lonely. You don't know what to do with yourself. Some years, I ate turkey sandwiches from 7-Eleven for Thanksgiving."

AS I HAVE traveled around Virginia, I've heard firsthand from so many people with stories similar to Lewis'. We can and should make sure that children in foster care now are able to make the permanent family connections Marthe Lewis didn't get the chance to make. And that's why the Fostering Connections to Success Act is so important.

The House of Representatives has shown great leadership in passing the Fostering Connections to Success Act this summer. Now we must look to the Senate to marshal its will to act as well. Several bipartisan bills before the Senate are incorporated in the Fostering Connections to Success Act, including Sen. Max Baucus's (D-Mont.) Tribal Foster Care and Adoption Act (S1956), Sen. Charles Grassley's (R-Iowa) Improved Adoption Incentives and Relative Guardianship Support Act (S3038), and the Kinship Caregiver Support Act (S661) introduced by Sens. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Olympia Snowe (R-Maine).

Unfortunately the legislative window for action in 2008 is rapidly closing. Today, nearly 1,800 Virginia children in foster care and 127,000 nationwide are still waiting to join adoptive homes. More than 26,000 children aged out of foster care last year without a safe, permanent family they could call their own. The myriad foster care bills in both the House and Senate signal that Congress recognizes its responsibility for these children and that a desire to help exists that bridges partisan differences. Now, we must encourage our senators to gather the will necessary to act on these important adoption and foster care reforms before it is too late.

Anne Holton is the first lady of Virginia and a former juvenile court judge. For more information on First Lady Anne Holton's For Keeps Initiative to reform Virginia's foster care system, see www.ForKeepsVirginia.org.