

July 25, 2008

The Honorable Max Baucus  
Chair, Committee on Finance  
219 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Grassley  
Ranking Member, Committee on Finance  
219 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Baucus and Senator Grassley:

I write on behalf of the American Bar Association (ABA) and its more than 400,000 members nationwide to express our strong support for the Fostering Connections to Success Act, H.R. 6307. The ABA has long been concerned with and deeply committed to addressing the challenges and improving the plight of the most vulnerable children in our community – the nearly 500,000 children in our foster care system. This bipartisan legislation contains concrete and long overdue improvements to our child welfare system that will promote critically important connections to services, family, health care, and education for children in foster care, while also addressing the monumental challenges youth face when they are forced – often at the age of 18 -- to leave care and transition to adulthood. We urge the Finance Committee to promptly consider and approve H.R.6307 with minor amendments we suggest below, so that it may be acted upon by the full Senate and become law in the short time remaining in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress.

Every year, over 24,000 youth “age out” of our nation’s foster care system and struggle mightily as they transition into adulthood. Without the resources and support often provided by a family, these young people disproportionately join the ranks of the homelessness, incarcerated and unemployed. The Fostering Connections to Success Act helps address the growing, yet largely overlooked needs of these at-risk youth by providing states with the ability to access federal foster care funds for youth until age 21, thereby ensuring that the most vulnerable youth in our community receive critically needed support as they embark on the challenges of adult life.

Continuing support to age 21 provides youth in foster care with resources all children need and deserve as they seek to become independent, including a safe place to live, educational and employment assistance and the guidance of a consistent adult anchor. Moreover, there is strong evidence that this approach works. The *Midwest Study of Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth* followed youth over five years and found that those who remained in foster care fared much better than those who were discharged at age 18. Specifically, youth who received ongoing support by remaining in care were less likely to have been arrested, less likely to be experiencing a mental health disorder and more likely to be enrolled in college. These results confirm that extending support to youth in foster care past age 18 makes a measured difference in their ability to achieve economic self-sufficiency and become productive members of society.

There are other critical improvements in the proposed Act, in particular provisions increasing aid for tribal funding, an issue on which you have long demonstrated leadership. Other important provisions include new oversight and enhancement of children's health care and requirements that children be provided with stable educational environments. H.R. 6307 would also increase federal support for relative caregivers, expand coverage of funding for training of child welfare workers, maintaining sibling ties through joint placements, and improving adoption incentives. These improvements are fully paid for through anti-fraud and other good government provisions that have bipartisan support.

While H.R. 6307 includes support for expanded funding for training of child welfare workers, we urge the Senate amend the bill to include in this coverage authorization of training for the judges, lawyers and court personnel who are part of critical decision-making for foster care children.

The children and youth in our nation's foster care system are counting on Congress to address the long-standing issues that plague the foster care system. The Fostering Connections to Success Act is an important step forward. We appreciate your consideration of the ABA's views and your long-standing and continuing commitment to the future of our most at-risk children.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Susman", written in a cursive style.

Thomas M. Susman  
Director