

**Family First Act: Critique**

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The Family First Prevention Services Act is a policy created in order to keep families together and avoid unnecessary trauma to the children from entering foster care and being removed from the home. Children who would otherwise be taken from their parents due to neglect, poverty, or substance abuse are instead provided services and learning opportunities to improve home life and safety conditions. This also includes stressing the importance of putting children in foster care into long term foster homes and pushing for adoption.

The Family First Act aims to reform “the federal child welfare financing streams... to provide services to families who are at risk of entering the child welfare system” (Torres, 2018). The bill aims to prevent children from entering foster care through federal reimbursement for mental health services, substance use treatment, and in-home parenting skill training. It also seeks to “improve the well-being of children already in foster by incentivizing states to reduce placement of children in congregate care” (Torres, 2018). Providing services while the children are still at home allows parents to receive the services they need and also prevent unnecessary trauma and harm to the child through a removal. Parents with mental health issues, substance abuse disorders, and/or lack of parenting skills due to other underlying issues are able to receive treatment and services and create a healthy space for the child while the child is still there.

However, there are some issues with this policy. This policy only services parents in need for substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, and parenting skills. It does not include funding to services such as domestic violence, crisis intervention, housing assistance, or neglect from poverty. Many parents would have benefited from adding any of these issues to the Family

First Act, especially those of low socio-economic status who may be under investigation for neglect due to poverty. These parents who may be under investigation for child malnourishment, medical neglect, or educational neglect but are otherwise not harming their children have no reason for their child to be taken away when if provided services, these issues would be fixed easily. While having funding for services for mental health, substance abuse, and parent skill training is important, there are many other issues that would need to be addressed under the same policy to have it truly be beneficial.

There is also an issue with Chapter II of FFPSA (Family First Prevention Services Act), titled “Ensuring the Necessity of a Placement that is Not in a Foster Family Home.” This chapter forbids federal reimbursement for a placement other than a foster family home beyond two weeks without an assessment using a tool approved by the Secretary of Health and Human Services in order to determine that the child’s needs cannot be met with family members or through placement in a foster family home. Such placements must also be approved by a court within 60 days (Child Welfare Monitor, 2019a). This approach is an issue due to a huge lack of foster homes in America. The authors of the Family First Act specified that a lack of foster homes is not an acceptable reason for determining that the needs of the child cannot be met in a foster family home (Child Welfare Monitor, 2019a). With that stated, where else would the children go? “Reports of children being housed in offices and hotels have come from California, Texas, Oregon, Kansas, and Georgia, Tennessee, and Washington DC. With group homes closed, this problem will only worsen” (Child Welfare Monitor, 2019a).

More issues to come, the next seems to be federal funding. The Family First Act has no new funding on it’s own, so it had to be taken from somewhere. FFPSA was designed to be budget neutral, redirecting funds toward foster care prevention services from congregate care and

a delay of an expansion in adoption assistance. Taking funds from one area and redirecting it to another halves both programs fundings. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that FFPSA will actually result in a \$66 million reduction in federal spending over a ten-year-period. “This comes on the heels of 20 years of federal disinvestment in foster care, leaving jurisdictions struggling to maintain reasonable caseloads and services” (Child Welfare Monitor, 2019b).

The Family First Prevention Services Act may have been created with the best intentions, but is hugely under reviewed. Instead of a stand alone policy, it seems more akin to a starting point that needs to be adjusted and worked on. It has its benefits that are well researched and well meaning, such as keeping children within a family in order to prevent harm and increase quality of life, but it falls short on any deeper thinking such as the lack of services that are funded and the lack of foster homes to make up for congregate care. With more review and more work on this policy, it could become what it intended to be, but as it stands, it is incomplete and only provides help for a limited number of families.

Resources

Child welfare monitor. b. (2019, November 7). *Family First Act: a False Narrative, a Lack of Review, a Bad Law*. Child Welfare Monitor.

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Torres, K. (2018, March 9). *Fact Sheet: Family First Prevention Services Act*. Campaign For Children.

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