

Strengthening Idaho's Foster Care Outcomes

March 2018

Overview of Senate Bill 1341

Improving the Lives of Children in Foster Care

At Idaho Voices for Children, we use research and data to determine which policies best support children and their families, and then we gather allies from across the state to drive change. One of our top priorities is to improve the lives of children in foster care. Voices strives to ensure children who have been served by foster care in Idaho grow up in supportive families and receive help to heal, build lasting relationships, and reach their full potential.

Members of the Interim Foster Care Study Committee have been working to develop policy solutions that address gaps in foster care services. The resulting legislation, Senate Bill 1341, is a step forward and will have lasting, positive impacts on foster care outcomes. It aims to:

1. Preserve sibling connections in foster care (§ 16-1601)
2. Strengthen support services for newly reunified families in foster care (§ 16-1622)
3. Establish a system for increased accountability for child welfare outcomes (§ 16-1629)
4. Enhance procedures that guide investigations of suspected child abuse and neglect (§ 16-1605)
5. Clarify the process for contesting foster care placement (§ 16-1619)

1. Preserve Sibling Connections in Foster Care



This legislation stipulates that sibling connections should be considered in foster placement decisions. If siblings are not able to be placed together, contact should be facilitated between brothers and sisters, unless it is contrary to the safety or well-being of any of the siblings.

One critical way we can minimize trauma for children who enter foster care is to preserve connections with their brothers and sisters. Maintaining sibling bonds in foster care spares children yet another loss and has been proven to improve children's physical, emotional, and social development.

A majority of states have policies aimed at protecting relationships between brothers and sisters in foster care. While it is not always possible to place groups of siblings together in care, relationships can be preserved through regularly facilitated contact with siblings through in-person visits, phone calls, and electronic communication.

Maintaining bonds between siblings in foster care:¹

- Helps children achieve developmental milestones
- Provides emotional support
- Ensures a shared history, culture, and sense of community
- Spares children the experience of another loss in their lives

2. Strengthen Support Services for Newly Reunified Families



This legislation creates a step-down process during periods of high-stress for families at risk of re-entry into foster care. It includes mandated participation in support services during trial home visits or protective supervision and encourages participation in services after permanent reunification.

After entering the foster care system, parents are required to complete case plans before being permanently reunified with their children. Families often find this time period very stressful and may struggle to balance case plans, employment, health needs, court hearings, and visitations. Providing strong wraparound support services during this time allows parents to progress towards reunification goals. A sudden loss of these support services, however, can lead to repeat maltreatment or re-entry into foster care.

In Idaho, 65 percent of children who exited foster care last year were reunified with their families.² Providing appropriate and timely services after children return home can help ensure more children grow up in safe, stable families.

¹ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2016). "Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption." Retrieved from www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/siblingissues/

² Casey Family Programs (2017). "State Fact Sheet: Idaho." Retrieved from www.casey.org/state-data/

3. Establish a System for Increased Accountability for Child Welfare Outcomes



This legislation creates a system for reviewing system-wide foster care outcomes, identifying gaps in the system, and holding child welfare stakeholders accountable. It establishes a Citizen Review Panel in each of Idaho's seven public health districts. Each panel will be tasked with evaluating foster care cases and providing recommendations for improvements to a newly established child protection committee in the Idaho Legislature.

In order to ensure foster care achieves the best possible outcomes, most states have established a system-wide oversight entity. The purpose of this oversight is to examine all of the components within the child welfare system, identify challenges, and address gaps in services. Despite multiple, well-meaning groups collaborating with the Idaho Department of Health & Welfare, the judicial branch, or the Idaho Legislature, Idaho lacks an identified entity that provides system-wide oversight and accountability for child welfare outcomes.

“Idaho has no system-level accountability or oversight for child welfare outcomes... This results in unclear, isolated, fragmented, or diffused responsibility for outcomes and improvements.”

Idaho Office of Performance Evaluations

4. Enhance Procedures that Guide Investigations of Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect



This legislation strengthens the procedures that direct when the department must open an investigation for reports of suspected child mistreatment. It states that the department must investigate any report in which there is a known prior conviction of felony injury to a child in the home under suspicion.

Keeping children safe should be a top priority across our communities. Idaho law requires that anyone who suspects a child is being mistreated must report it to law enforcement or the Department of Health & Welfare. When the State receives a report, it is their job to look into the concern, determine whether a child is endangered, and take action to intervene as appropriate.

When community members suspect a child is being abused or neglected and make a report, they typically get it right in Idaho. Strengthening procedures that guide the follow-up and investigation of reported suspicions will help ensure community concerns do not slip through the cracks and that kids who have been mistreated are not harmed again.

5. Clarify the Process for Contesting a Child's Foster Care Placement



This legislation provides clarifying language around the process of contesting a foster care placement decision. It gives discretion to the courts to deny a placement if the best interests of the child are not being met and to direct the Department of Health & Welfare to find an alternative placement for the child.

If found to be in imminent danger, a child is removed from the home by law enforcement or a court order. The Department of Health & Welfare is then responsible for placing the child in the care of a relative or foster parent. The department strives to ensure the placement offers a safe environment that has access to support services and a connection with the child's community and family. If a child or a representative of a child has serious concerns over the placement choice of the department, a clear process for contesting placement is crucial, but current law is unclear.

Helping Children Grow Up in Safe, Stable, and Loving Environments

Foster care is a response to abuse and neglect – not a solution. To truly transform the child welfare system, we should make smarter investments in strategies that ultimately reduce the need for foster care and produce better outcomes for children. Providing targeted and effective interventions can safely prevent the need for foster care and ensure that children who suffer any kind of maltreatment are not harmed again.

Learn more about Idaho Voices for Children's policy priorities at idahovoices.org or contact Christine Tiddens at ctiddens@jannus.org.

