

The Des Moines Register

Editorial: Help kids stay home

More flexibility in federal rules could keep some children out of foster care.

By [Register Editorial Board](#)

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A teenage mom with too much stress and too little parenting experience grabs her toddler's arm too hard and leaves a bruise. A day-care teacher discovers it, social workers visit the home and also find an unsafe environment and a dad who uses drugs. The state of Iowa, short on resources to help this family get on track, eventually ends up taking the child into foster care.

Rather than providing a family counselor several hours a week and access to a drug program, the state places the toddler in the home of a stranger.

Most Iowans would agree the state should do all it can to keep children out of foster care. Yet Iowans may not realize how the federal government makes that difficult. The largest federal funding stream, a program called Title IV-E to support kids in foster care, mandates the money be spent only when a child is *in* foster care. The dollars can't be spent to try to keep kids *out of* foster care in the first place.

This simply doesn't make sense.

The federal dollars (some \$44.5 million for Iowa) can be used to pay foster parents, group homes and services once a child has been removed from his or her parents. The dollars cannot be used by states to pay for things like substance-abuse treatment, care by other family members, drug testing for parents or family counseling in an effort to avoid foster care. To get the needed flexibility to spend on prevention, a state must obtain a federal waiver or agree to a freeze in funding via a block grant.

As of last month, 12 states were requesting waivers. Iowa is one of them. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services can only grant 10 waivers a year. Also, HHS loses its authority to grant these waivers at the end of the month unless Congress extends the waiver program.

The system is "out of whack," according to Jerry Foxhoven of the Iowa Child Advocacy Board. "We keep buying firetrucks instead of buying smoke alarms. Can we keep from buying firetrucks? No. But maybe with the alarms, we can buy fewer."

According to Iowa Department of Human Services Director Kevin Concannon, Iowa could use the money to keep children from being sent to foster care. "I would love to be able to use the money for children who would meet the criteria to be removed, but we could support families instead," he said.

Iowa is in the midst of redesigning the state human-services system. The waiver is needed to help Iowa to do what makes sense: Keep families together, keep kids from the disruption caused by foster care and invest in prevention. The bureaucratic red tape of the federal government gets in the way of that.

In states that have been granted waivers, innovative approaches have been implemented. Delaware used its waiver to pay for substance-abuse treatment and services for parents whose kids were in foster care, cutting the time those kids spend in foster homes by nearly one-third.

Iowa would do well to have this same flexibility. Iowa's lawmakers in Washington should focus on creating a federal funding system that works to improve the lives of children instead of tying the hands of states.