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Editorial

Foster care in Congress

Tennessee can take only slight comfort in a report that concludes that all states are struggling with the issue of placing foster children into permanent settings.

Still, the report by the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care lends a national audience to a problem that has been particularly painful to Tennesseans. The state is under a court order to overhaul its foster care program. Now Congress is taking a look at a national approach.

The Pew report underscores the necessity of just such an approach. The investigation shows that half a million children are in foster care for at least five years while they wait for a permanent placement. That number of unplaced children has doubled since the 1980s.

While states are fairly responsible at getting children out of harmful situations, they fail miserably at finding long-range solutions. The federal government currently rewards foster care instead of keeping families together or finding permanent homes when reconciliation is impossible.

The findings shouldn't surprise anyone: Children left in foster care for lengthy stays often suffer emotional, behavioral and academic problems that a more stable setting might avoid. The recommendations do contain some surprises, including a proposal to award block grants to states as a way to give departments dealing with children more flexibility in how their money is spent.

In Congress, an unlikely duo of House Majority Leader Tom DeLay and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, are pushing foster care reforms. DeLay is at work on a Bush administration proposal to award block grants.

On that, there should be plenty of debate. As Tennessee well knows, sufficient funding must be a critical component of any successful program. And the panel even has recommendations for Congress in helping local courts speed the process: It proposes a minimum of \$25 million to improve tracking of abused and neglected children, training for court staff and for child advocates.

With the issue shifting to Congress, Tennessee's congressional delegation should work closely with state officials to help craft a law helpful at home. Tennessee has struggled with the issue. A national approach can only help the state's effort and the state's foster children.