

Family News In Focus

Children Trapped in Foster Care Need Help

by Stuart Shepard, correspondent

A plan is being floated in Washington to reduce the number of kids stuck in foster care.

More than 19,000 children in foster care in the United States are in a kind of limbo—they are unable to return home, yet adoption is not a possibility.

A group called Fostering Results identified 19,000 kids a court has determined cannot return to their birth families, but who also are not up for adoption. Most are in a foster care relationship with a relative.

It's an unstable situation that foster parents like John and Amy Tracy well understand. Over the years, the couple has cared for dozens of foster children.

"When they're uprooted from their home, regardless of what the situation is, they have a different bed to sleep in that night, different clothes, different rules for the home to get used to," John Tracy said.

Mark Testa advocates a third solution—for the relative to establish legal guardianship—but a significant barrier stands in the way.

"The problem is that there is no mechanism in federal law to then continue assisting these families with the financial support they need," Testa said. "That's unlike what we do for foster care or for adoptions."

He said subsidizing guardianship would give stability to the children and eliminate a lot of government involvement.

"By doing this," Testa explained, "not only will we create permanent homes for 19,000 or more children, but we'll also save dollars to the taxpayer and also make a decision that really families and children want."

He sees federal dollars making the change.

But there are concerns about the plan, which include the possibility of a child being reunited with abusive parents, because subsidized guardians—while they do assume custody—don't have as much legal power as adoptive parents. And there is the concern that some parents will turn their children over to state custody just so they can become subsidized guardians.