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## Hill OKs adoption bill

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Legislation that encourages states to find adoptive homes for foster children — especially those ages 9 and older — has been passed by Congress and is on its way to President Bush.

"Despite recent progress made, many more children [in foster care] are in need of adoptive families," Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Tommy G. Thompson said yesterday.

Almost half — 47 percent — of the 116,653 children in foster care who are freed for adoption are older than 9, said Mr. Thompson. The Adoption Promotion Act of 2003 creates a new bonus category for "older child" adoptions to encourage states to find permanent homes for these children, he said.

The new legislation, which was passed by the House last month and the Senate on Friday, reauthorizes an incentive fund created in the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act.

The program will now be funded at \$43 million a year for five years. States receive \$4,000 (or \$6,000 for a child with special needs) for every adoption that exceeds the previous year's number of adoptions.

The legislation also asks states to begin tracking adoptions of foster children ages 9 to 17. States that increase the number of these adoptions will receive \$4,000 per adoption, or \$8,000 per adoption if the adoption meets other criteria.

Adoption specialists say older-child adoptions are less common because these children have special needs — they typically have experienced more years of abuse or neglect, and struggle with feelings of anger, grief and low self-esteem. Despite these hurdles, adoption-support groups are filled with testimonies about the rewards of adopting teens and older children.

In 2002, there were 51,000 adoptions of foster children, 3,703 more than the previous year, HHS said in September.

Almost \$15 million is being paid in bonuses to 25 states and Puerto Rico, HHS said. Maryland and West Virginia won adoption bonuses of \$712,000 and \$18,000, respectively.

Separately, a study released last month by Fostering Results, a private campaign aimed at promoting awareness of child-welfare issues, said that since the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act was passed, 33 states and the District have doubled their foster-care adoptions.

Cumulatively, from 1998 to 2002, states have placed more than 230,000 children in adoptive homes. That is more than the number of adoptions during the previous 10 years combined, said Jess McDonald, co-director of Fostering Results and former director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

Locally, the District increased its annual adoptions from around 110 in 1997 to 313 in 2002. Similarly, Maryland increased its adoptions from 342 to 922, West Virginia increased adoptions from 182 to 361 and Virginia increased adoptions from 298 to 422.

HHS estimates that 533,000 children were in foster care last year. The goal of most children was to be reunified with their families.