

Why What You Think About Foster Care Matters

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Today, while so many are focused on issues such as gun control, health care and economic security, we as a nation face another immediate concern that is impacting us all, even though many of us are not aware of it.

The number of children in the Foster Care system is staggering, and their education, financial status and job outlook is going to affect all of us—regardless of whether we have any involvement about the foster care system. Here are a few foster care considerations that we all need to be mindful of.

Foster care's financial impact

When you think about the economy and how much is paid in taxes each year, consider the fact that every child in the foster care system is supported by your taxes. In 2012, there were about 650,000 children that spent some time in and out of home care in the United States. The Department of Economic Security pays foster parents to house these kids in addition to paying for childcare, clothing, food, etc.

Another, larger concern that we as citizens should consider is what becomes of these children in the foster system when they transition to adulthood. According to 2011 data from the website Angels Foster Family Network, of foster children:

- 54 percent earn a high school diploma.
- 2 percent earn a bachelor's degree or higher
- 84 percent become parents too soon, exposing their children to a repeated cycle of neglect and abuse.
- 51 percent are unemployed.
- 30 percent have no health insurance.
- 30 percent receive public assistance.

How is this impacting the American citizens who are not only paying for the children to be supported, but also paying for their unemployment, healthcare and public assistance as adults?

Foster care's emotional impact

The foster care system takes an emotional toll on the children involved both while they are in it and after. According to the advocacy group Children's Rights, up to 80 percent of foster children have serious emotional problems.

More than 60,000 children living in foster care have had their biological parental rights terminated, and once the parental rights are terminated, many of the children will wait on average two years to be adopted. This translates to a lack of consistency in their home lives, and sometimes, a lifetime of trouble. Thirty-five percent of foster children reported having been incarcerated at some point before reaching the age of 17. According to a study from 2006, around 25 percent of those in prison were once in foster care.

With these grim facts, it stands to reason that we need to address these issues today and help focus on the issues that create the widespread problems and concerns of tomorrow.

Changing the future of foster care

As these statistics show, the foster care system has far-reaching problems for the kids involved and Americans in general. It's time for America to change the way we look at concerns and focus more on redeveloping a system that allows us to love and nurture foster children. The children in foster care today need support, education and a better system that helps them to be successful as adults, which in turn would be better for our nation as a whole. Instead of supporting the system in place today, perhaps it's time to look at re-adjusting it.

In the meantime, there are many ways to get involved today to help our foster children prepare for tomorrow. Obviously, you could look into becoming a foster parent or even a foster-to-adopt parent, in which you provide a child a permanent home. But not all of us are in a position for these sorts of measures, and if you're not, there are still many ways for you to get involved.

One is to volunteer to work with the children as a mentor or even as a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate). For some children, having reunification with their biological parents would be a win-win situation, but many of these parents need help and guidance. According to Connie Hayek, a child welfare consultant in the D.C. area, some of the best ways to help struggling biological parents include assisting with meals, household tasks, reaching out and providing encouragement and assisting with job-seeking skills.

Organizations such as the Dave Thomas Foundation or websites such as adoptuskids.org are excellent resources to help you take that first step in making a change for tomorrow.

Foster Care is an issue that can't be ignored any longer. Especially within the Church, it's high time for us to reach out to love, support and mentor foster kids throughout their time in the system and after they age out. It's time to look at what we can do today to impact the future of foster care.