

# A new chapter in America's child welfare system

January 21, 2025

By [Paige Sutherland](#) and [Meghna Chakrabarti](#)



The U.S. flag flies at full staff at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, Monday, Jan. 20, 2025, during the 60th Presidential Inauguration. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta)

At the end of last year, Congress passed the largest overhaul of the nation's child welfare system in more than 15 years.

The reform includes more support for kinship care, aging out youth and efforts to prevent the separation of families due to poverty.

Today, *On Point*: How these reforms will make a difference for children and families in the U.S.

## Guests

**Zach Laris**, founder and executive director at Bolder Horizons, a nonprofit focused on child welfare policy and advocacy.

**Darin LaHood**, Republican U.S. Representative of Illinois's 16th District.

**Glenda Wright**, former foster youth and now advocate and working professional on child welfare issues.

## Also Featured

**David Simmons**, director of government affairs and advocacy at the National Indian Child Welfare Association.

**Russ Lang**, former foster youth from Ohio.

**Claire Boyd**, foster parent from Texas.

## Transcript

### Part I

MEGHNA CHAKRABARTI: A little earlier this month, January 4th, 2025 to be exact, the first major overhaul of the federal child welfare system in more than 15 years was signed into law. It passed Congress with bipartisan support. And it's poised to change the lives of families who depend on the federal child welfare system.

So you'd think that with this major good news, President Biden would have held a signing ceremony at the Oval Office. And every news outlet from CNN, Fox, MSNBC, NPR would have run a story on it. But none of that happened.

President Biden had no glitzy signing ceremony. In fact, the reform was signed quietly on a Saturday.

And no major news outlet ran even the slightest stories on this bill's passage. If you try googling, federal child welfare reform bill gets signed, you really won't find a thing from almost every news outlet in this country, with a couple exceptions, which we'll talk about later. So blame it on the news media's tilt towards the negative and sensational, which is unfortunate, because this reform is a big deal.

In its 26 pages, Congress not only added \$75 million more dollars to the federal child welfare system 2026, it also made several major policy shifts, perhaps most importantly, changing the law so that living in poverty is no longer classified as neglect and cannot be used to separate children from their families.

And there is much more, as well. So today, we want to spend the hour talking about this reform. Learning what aspects of it are good news indeed, and what still needs to be done for the hundreds of thousands of children and families who in some way depend on federal child welfare. And later in this hour we will hear from some of those people.

Well, let's start with Zach Laris. He's the founder and executive director at Bolder Horizons, a non-profit that's focused on child welfare policy and advocacy. And he joins us from Springfield, Virginia. Zach, welcome to On Point.

**ZACH LARIS:** Thanks so much for having me, Meghna.

**CHAKRABARTI:** So you have described in your website, Child Welfare, that this is a huge bipartisan victory for children and families.

It's the enactment of the protecting [America's Children by strengthening Families Act](#). What makes it so huge in your eyes?

LARIS: What makes this so huge is the shift that it represents to thinking about how we can really focus on helping families before they ever experience a crisis. If you think about the analogy to our health care system, you know, the emergency room, the hospital, that's where we have the crisis response, the heroic efforts to intervene when something has already gone terribly wrong.

We already have a lot of emphasis and investment in that and child welfare, in the form of investigations, crisis response and foster care. And the big opportunity is really going further upstream, just like we need to support primary care to be able to help people before they ever get sick. If we can help families before they ever experience that crisis, we're able to avoid it.

CHAKRABARTI: So keeping families out of a crisis, essentially, I mean, that does sound like a really big deal. You know, I have to say, I struggled a little bit with finding solid numbers on how many people we're talking about here. I mean, I saw the [Annie E. Casey Foundation reported](#) that in, what, 2022, there were half a million children in the foster care system.

But does this reform touch even more families potentially than that? I mean, how would you classify its hugeness?

LARIS: Absolutely. I mean, if you think just last week, the Federal Children's Bureau released their updated data on child maltreatment. So we know roughly 7 million children per year are the subject of a report to Child Protective Services.

And then from there, there's the process of investigation and figuring out if abuse or neglect has occurred. That's not a neutral experience. So even if

there hasn't been any harm for that family, that's a huge disruption to their life.

CHAKRABARTI: Okay, so there's a lot of people who come under this umbrella that could potentially feel an impact from this reform.

Now, it lives within the Social Security Act, right? And it lives under something called Title IV-B. Can you explain that?

LARIS: Yeah, what a name, right? It's for something so consequential; you'd think you would have an exciting fun name with a nice ring to it. Instead, we get some Roman numerals and letters.

So in the Social Security Act, we have lots of major public policy for children and families, and Title IV of the Social Security Act has some huge programs. And so Title IV-B is this big federal law that provides investments to support state child welfare agencies and create some sort of ground rules, a floor of standards for how agencies do their work, and then make some really important investments that are very flexible. So that states and communities and public private partnerships can do the work that they know that families need.

CHAKRABARTI: Okay. Now, since it's in the Social Security Act. That would mean that it would have had to undergo reauthorization several times, right, in the past 20 years.

LARIS: Yes, Title IV-B is on usually a five-year cycle, so it goes through updates every five years or so, unless Congress, you know, decides to take, you know, shorter term extensions, which they've done at times, too.

CHAKRABARTI: But then, but what I understand is that the passage of the Supporting America's Children and Families Act is the first major reform in what, 15 years? How, how did that happen?

LARIS: First major reform in quite a few years. Yeah, I would say there's been several major reforms that this really builds upon, so.

Dating back to the Fostering Connections to Success and Promoting Adoptions Act back in 2008. And then we had the Family First Prevention Services Act in 2018. That was a really big groundbreaking shift where there was a push to say, we really need to follow what the evidence tells us. We know that investing in services to prevent unnecessary foster care is the right thing, gets good outcomes, and also is better for the taxpayer.

And this really builds upon that. By updating Title IV-B, so Family First updated Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, which is a separate set of investments primarily in foster care, but now can support some services for families when they're kind of at that front door of child welfare. So there's already a crisis happening, and it's a way to say, we can give you these services so that you can stay safely together.

The promise of this bill is to say, let's go further upstream and help you before there even is a crisis.

CHAKRABARTI: Okay. But the reform to Title IV-B hadn't happened in a long time.

LARIS: Yeah, it's been some time since we've had this level of change and two decades since we've had any new investments in Title IV-B.

CHAKRABARTI: Wow. Okay, so let's talk about the thing that seems to be like a major policy shift. We'll talk about the money in just a second. But in the past, poverty could be a reason to claim that families were neglecting their children and therefore separating them. And that will no longer be allowed under this new law?

Explain that.

LARIS: It's incredible, isn't it?

Yeah. Explain that.

LARIS: It's incredible. So often, you know, families are experiencing many forms of crisis, and one of those can be economic deprivation. And we know that there are major challenges with being able to figure out how to get the services and supports families need to be stable.

So if you've got, for example, a child who's coming to school every day for a week, wearing the same clothes. And the teacher makes a report to CPS to say, I'm worried about this child. What's going on? If there's an investigation, we find that the challenge is that the family, you know, had their washing machine break and they can't afford to buy a new one.

We shouldn't bring that child into foster care. We should get that family a new washing machine and make sure they have what they need to be able to thrive. So we've seen some states make this kind of reform, but we haven't seen this kind of clear directive from the federal government to say, poverty alone is not grounds for removing a child.

CHAKRABARTI: When you describe it the way you did, it sounds unbelievable that that is a reason that children have been separated from their families, but it indeed has happened and happens.

LARIS: Well, and oftentimes we're talking about, you know, complex crises. Right? Yeah. And, you know, I also, you know, will say, there are a lot of children who really do need that crisis intervention response. Because oftentimes you might have many layers of, you know, intergenerational trauma for a family, unmet substance use disorder.

Treatment needs for a parent, domestic violence, a whole variety of factors. So oftentimes, all those things can become entangled. In a weird way, we

oftentimes talk about in child welfare, we have an under-reporting problem and an over reporting problem. We are over reporting, oftentimes low income families of color who are receiving investigations at disproportionate rates to the population.

And at the same time, we have almost 2,000 children a year who die from abuse or neglect. So we really need to be able to dial our system in to identify risk appropriately and intervene in the right way.

CHAKRABARTI: And this takes a step in that direction.

LARIS: This takes a really critical step in that direction.

CHAKRABARTI: Okay, so explain to me though, since so many of the touch points for the child welfare system do come through the states, as you'd mentioned. Regarding this new approach of poverty exclusively cannot be used as a reason to separate families, how is the federal government setting that standard?

I mean, what levers are they using to get that message to the states?

LARIS: Yeah, so the blunt tool that the federal government often is able to use is conditioning the receipt of federal funds on meeting certain standards. So under this program, for example, states every five years have a plan that they send to the federal government, that outlines everything that they'll be doing and gives the assurances that they have the right rules and regs and requirements on the books.

And so this is one of those many things that will be required to be able to demonstrate to the Feds when you receive this funding that you're following these rules. Okay. I see.

So then speaking of funding, there is a, what, \$75 million more annually. That comes with this bill into the federal program regarding child abuse and

neglect, or combating that.

That seems to be, I mean, in comparison to the defense budget, which is my favorite thing to compare everything to, it seems like literally a drop in an ocean. But how much of a difference would \$75 million additional dollars make?

LARIS: It's a critical step forward. I mean, we're certainly in no danger of accidentally overfunding the child welfare system anytime soon in this country.

But we do know that these investments will go a long way toward really helping provide states and tribes the funds that they need to be able to do this important work. The really critical thing here is that this is a permanent increase in the funding. So going forward, even in future reauthorizations, this is now the floor below which the funding will not go.

CHAKRABARTI: Oh, okay. Now, we have about a minute before we have to take our first break, Zach. This passed with bipartisan support in Congress. And in fact, I mean, how would you describe the kind of across the aisle support that this reform received?

LARIS: Overwhelming. The level of bipartisan support and enthusiasm is astounding.

This passed the House 405 to 10. It passed the Senate on a unanimous consent vote. Those are renaming a Post Office type vote levels. You would think that there was really nothing consequential happening here, and yet we have this major step forward. And it's a testament to the bipartisan leadership of so many in Congress that are doing this important work.

## **Part II**

CHAKRABARTI: Today we are talking about a success that came out of Congress in this last Congress and was signed by President Joe Biden earlier this month. But that you have probably never heard of. One piece of good news out of Washington is called the Protecting America's Children by Strengthening Families Act.

And it is the biggest overhaul of the federal child welfare system in 15 years. So today we're trying to make good on figuring, learning about this good news story out of Washington, and Zach Laris joins us. He's founder and executive director at Bolder Horizons. It's a non-profit that's focused on child welfare policy and advocacy.

Zach, in one quick second, I'm going to get to the other major changes that have come in this act, but I want to stick with money for one more second, to put this additional annual \$75 million in context. Because you've written that in inflation adjusted terms, funding for federal child welfare has actually been steadily going down over the past two decades, right?

I'm looking at your research here that says it reached over \$1 billion in fiscal year 2004. And then again, in inflation adjusted terms, in FY 2024, it was down to \$710 million. So that's a 30% decrease. Do you have an idea why?

LARIS: It's incredibly significant, isn't it?

CHAKRABARTI: Yeah.

LARIS: And this is work from the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service looking at this over time. So this is a program that has had stagnant level funding for multiple decades. And so this is really an opportunity to take that step forward to replenish the fuel tank and to really start moving in the right direction to do the work that we know families need.

CHAKRABARTI: Okay, but so that, it hasn't even been level funded, right?

If talking about inflation adjusted terms.

LARIS: Yeah, we have a major opportunity to continue building on what we have here. Because we've got a long way to go to really close that gap and this takes a huge step forward for that.

CHAKRABARTI: Okay. Well, Zach, hang on here for just a second because joining us now is Representative Darin LaHood.

He is a Republican who represents Illinois 16th District. He's currently on his fourth term and he serves as, excuse me, he serves on the House Ways & Means Committee and chairs the Work and Welfare Subcommittee, and he sponsored the Supporting America's Children and Families Act. Representative LaHood, welcome to On Point.

DARIN LAHOOD: Thank you for having me today.

CHAKRABARTI: So tell me a little bit about the process that went into gathering so much bipartisan support to pass this major reform for America's children and families.

LAHOOD: Absolutely. Well, we started it roughly two years ago at the beginning of the new Congress, the 118th Congress, and the Work and Welfare Subcommittee that I'm fortunate enough to chair, is also has the ranking member of Danny Davis from Illinois.

Now we are in two different parties. Obviously, he's a Democrat. I'm a Republican, but we look to find common ground on how we could really help vulnerable children in our foster care system, and fix a system that needed to be made more efficient, more effective, more accountable. And I would also just say, I mean, the statistics that I saw are really alarming, when you look at the hardships faced by youth in foster care.

Roughly 20% become homeless. 70% are arrested by age 26, and only 55% are employed and only 24% are in school or work training programs. So starting with that and figuring out what can we do differently, was kind of our predicate.

CHAKRABARTI: So what were some of your priorities in terms of achieving these efficient, effective and accountability goals in the act?

LAHOOD: Well, we wanted to look at what some states had done. We cast kind of a wide net, looked at states all across the country. What they had done, maybe that was creative or innovative in their particular state. That was one. Number two, we did a number of field hearings. We had a very successful field hearing in Chicago where we had a number of witnesses that talked about the foster care system.

That was another part of it. And then we looked at the barriers in the system and what we could remove, kind of the inequities that we saw there. And so that was kind of the starting point. And then we really worked through it at the staff level and the member level to come to a consensus.

CHAKRABARTI: You know, I do, I still think it's so remarkable that this is the first time, I mean, in the language of your own press release, that in a generation, there's been this kind of modernization and overhaul of Title IV-B. Why do you think it took so long?

LAHOOD: Yeah, it is really astonishing. I mean, I don't know the answer to that. But I think the timing was right for us to come together on the subcommittee.

We had some really quality subcommittee members from across the country that were engaged in this process. And I think politically it just worked out that it was time for it to happen. So I don't, I mean, you'd have to look back.

There were some ups and downs. There was some progress made a number of years ago, pre COVID, but nothing that we could put into law.

CHAKRABARTI: I see. So was there anything that you really wanted in the act that in this long process, as you're describing, didn't get in there?

LAHOOD: Well yeah, I mean, listen, in any bipartisan bill, there's compromise and there's things that we would have liked to have seen differently in terms of streamlining the process, making it more efficient, more accountable.

I think the accountability aspect for a number of our foster care system systems could have been a little more stringent and a little stronger in there. And making it more difficult, or I guess me back up. I think more oversight would have been the best thing, I don't think we achieved what we wanted to there.

But again, I wasn't the one making all the decisions.

CHAKRABARTI: But when it comes to accountability, are you talking about the state agencies reporting more clearly to the federal government, for people who don't understand the system? Like, what do you mean?

LAHOOD: Well, what I mean is there's a lot of federal dollars that flow back to these states, that go to different agencies.

There's been a lack of transparency, a lack of oversight, making sure the money is spent the way that it's supposed to, part of our role in Congress is oversight. And I don't know that, I think we could have some more accountability and consequences for when that money isn't spent correctly, or there's violations of the law.

CHAKRABARTI: Okay, well and actually what consequences would you think would be appropriate?

LAHOOD: Well, not, I mean, cutting off some money or restricting some of the money, or putting them on probation, some of those things. And on the opposite end, where programs have been run very well, and they've exceeded their expectations.

We ought to reward those programs.

CHAKRABARTI: Yeah. Congressman, just two more quick questions here. As you've been, as you know, Zach Laris is helping us go through in detail what's in the act, but I wanted to get your thoughts on, there's one particular one about helping parents who are suffering from substance abuse disorders of any kind, safely care for their children.

Can you talk about that one a bit? Because that's one that also touches many American families.

LAHOOD: It does. You know, obviously I think we've had a renewed focus in our country on behavioral health and mental health. And some of that relates to abuse of alcohol. And focusing on that more on how do we, you know, find that right balance between allowing kids to stay with their biological parents and not move them to foster care.

You know, but again, finding that right approach. I think it's something that we looked at and focused on and how do we get them treatment that can be impactful. There's a number of very successful programs across the country that have helped on alcohol treatment, alcohol rehabilitation, and also, as it also affects mental health and behavioral health.

And so transitioning people to those programs that have been successful, and using them more is part of what we looked at.

CHAKRABARTI: And finally, Congressman, this additional \$75 million annually starting in 2026 is significant. I was just going over with Zach Laris,

though some numbers that show that overall federal funding for federal child welfare programs has basically dropped by 30% in the past 20 years. So there's still quite a bit of funding. There's still a big funding gap. Do you think that there is momentum off the wind with the supporting America's Children and Families Act to, you know, fill that funding gap even more, perhaps in this Congress?

LAHOOD: Yeah, I mean, I think the approach we'll take with this is there's always an ask or a request or a need for potentially more money in there. What I think we'll be interested to see is that the program changes that we have made, if they are successful, and we see a program that's run, again, more efficient, more effective, more accountable.

Then I think that opens the door for more resources and more funding. And then that has to be, I think, also run parallel with the success that we have. The amount of, you know, I read those statistics at the beginning. If those statistics begin to change and we have less homeless, less people arrested, more people employed, I think that opens the door for us to say, Hey, these changes we made worked, and now we should look at more funding streams to help people.

Well, Congressman Darin LaHood, he's a Republican who serves Illinois' 16th District, and he is the chair of the Work and Welfare Subcommittee on House Ways and Means, and one of the sponsors of the Supporting America's Children and Families Act.

Congressman LaHood, thank you so much for joining us today.

Great to be with you. Thank you.

CHAKRABARTI: All right. Zach Laris, let me turn back to you. What are some of your responses or reactions to what Darin LaHood said there?

LARIS: Well, first and foremost, just incredibly grateful to Representative LaHood for his bipartisan leadership on this, as well as Ranking Member Davis and full committee Chairman and Ranking Member Jason Smith and Richie Neal, respectively.

Their partnership, as he mentioned, just really is a testament to how bipartisan these issues are and the incredible progress that Congress continues to make over and over.

CHAKRABARTI: Okay. Well that you said first of all. Second of all?

LARIS: Yeah. I mean, I think, you know, he really pointed to the need to get the balance right in terms of how to make this program work effectively.

And I think that was a really critical part of this law. I mean, to his point, there's some really critical policy in here, in terms of reducing administrative burden, right? There's lots of reporting, there's lots of paperwork that frontline caseworkers are doing that's pulling them away from the direct interaction and engagement of a family.

There's lots of back-end paperwork that states are doing that isn't really helping us figure out if the program is working, but is taking a lot of time. And so he's absolutely right that making progress on that is important, and this law takes a step on that and there will continue to be opportunities to make this work more efficiently and effectively, because I share his concerns about those long-term outcomes.

We really want to change that trajectory for every child, every family and every young person.

CHAKRABARTI: Well, I have to say, in total transparency the way I found out that this act had been signed into law was through just kind of poking around on the internet and finding the one media outlet that did report on

it, and that was tribal media, in this country. So news and journalism that serves America's indigenous tribes. And looking back, it makes a lot of sense because of the relationship that tribal governments have with the federal government, when it specifically, when it comes to family and child welfare.

So with that in mind, we reached out to David Simmons. He's the director of government affairs and advocacy at the National Indian Child Welfare Association. And he's been working with Congress to get this reform through and been doing that for more than two years. And Simmons says his group pushed for closing a crucial gap.

This is another thing in the act, the lack of data on Native children subject to the Indian Child Welfare Act.

*DAVID SIMMONS: If you said to me how many Indian Child Welfare Act cases are there at any given moment, I wouldn't be able to tell you that number. Nobody could tell you that number. Because we just don't, we don't, the states don't collect that information, and nobody requires them to collect it.*

*So, I mean, there's some examples of a few states who are voluntarily collecting that information and created their own data collection around the Indian Child Welfare Act cases, but that's a very small number and they're not supported by any federal funds of, you know, really to do that. So, it's a real gap.*

*It's a real deficit there. You know, data is what helps you understand. You know, kind of, project for trends, future trends and understand sort of like past practice and what worked and what didn't work, too. In many respects, native children seem somewhat invisible to many policymaking bodies, because there just isn't much data.*

CHAKRABARTI: I'd go even further and say, without the data, they are invisible to policy making bodies. And it's remarkable because in this day and age where data drives everything, Simmons says that agencies don't even

know things such as how often Native children are reunified with their families, or how long they are in the child welfare system, or how often they are placed in permanent homes.

State agencies just don't know these things. But, with data, once those problems are identified, then issues can begin to be solved. Now, of the data that we do have, Simmons says it shows that Native children are overrepresented in the child welfare system.

*SIMMONS: Native children in the United States generally are represented at a rate of somewhere two to three times their population rate.*

*And what that means is that if they're 2% of the population, they're 6% of the foster care rate in the United States. And in some states, the disproportionate rate is anywhere from like, you know, one or two times their normal population rate, to as high as 12 or 14 times their rate.*

CHAKRABARTI: So the reauthorization of Title IV-B also provides more federal funds, not just for states, but for tribal child welfare programs.

For Tribal Courts and more technical assistance and reduces administrative burdens to improve services. You heard Zach Laris talk about that just a second ago. Nevertheless, Simmons says federal funding for Tribal child welfare services still lags significantly behind what states receive.

SIMMONS: Within the federal child welfare system, they distribute \$13 billion every year, and of that \$13 billion, tribal governments only receive one half of 1 percent of that \$13 billion dollars, even though their population represents 4% of the U.S. population.

CHAKRABARTI: Overrepresented and underfunded. So that's David Simmons. He's Director of Government Affairs and Advocacy at the National Indian Child Welfare Association. Zach Laris, can you talk about this a little

bit more, about the tribal part of the passage of the Supporting America's Children and Families Act.

What difference will it make for America's indigenous tribes?

LARIS: Yeah, as David mentioned, I mean, it's really critically important to remember that in addition to providing funding to states, our federal child welfare laws and funds also go to tribal governments, either through partnership with the states or for tribes that run their own programs, they receive those funds directly.

And as he mentioned, for many years, we've had these challenges with administrative burden, making it too hard to be able to access those funds for tribal governments. And so this law takes some steps to make that process of applying for and receiving funds more streamlined.

CHAKRABARTI: What about this when he pointed out that like some seems to be like very basic data wasn't ever required to be collected about children and their lives and their whereabouts?

I mean, that really seems surprising to me.

LARIS: Absolutely. Yeah, it's critically important. You know, if we want to be able to manage progress, we need to be able to measure progress. And so it's vital that we have the right data.

CHAKRABARTI: Why was it never required?

LARIS: Yeah, I mean, I think many of these things are vestiges of the difficulties that we see in terms of having supports that tribal governments need from, you know, the federal laws that we have.

Oftentimes it's oh, right, we're supposed to add tribes into this program. And so you can have things that make that harder to be able to make effective.

### Part III

CHAKRABARTI: Today, Zach Laris joins us. He's walking us through the Supporting America's Children and Families Act. It's a huge change in the federal child welfare system that was almost entirely unreported when it passed the last Congress with overwhelming bipartisan support and was signed by President Joe Biden into law earlier this month.

Now, this act includes a number of significant changes. The biggest changes in the past 15 years, including, as Zach has told us, reducing the administrative burden of child welfare caseworkers by aiming for 15%, so they can actually spend more time on children and less on paperwork.

Programs to try to improve relationships between incarcerated parents and their children who are in foster care. Increased funding for two and a half million grandparents and relatives at kinship care who are raising children who would otherwise go into foster care. We talked about how poverty was no longer going to be allowed to be used as a reason to separate children from their families.

And then there's this one. Easing the transition out of foster care for children who age out by offering assistance to them until they reach the age of 26. Now that's something that Russ Lang, in particular, who aged out of the system at 18, says is sorely needed.

*RUSS LANG: Every year, there's about 20,000 foster youth who age out of the system.*

*You know, I was one of them. At 18, I found myself lacking housing, lacking proper support of how to do my finances. I don't know how to do my taxes. I had to apply for school. I had to apply for these grants. I had to do it all on my own. I didn't have an independent living worker to be able to help me.*

*Literally, as soon as I emancipated, they were like, Oh, there you go. Good luck. You know, Oh, by the way, here's \$600 to, you know, help you along your way. We're sorry about all the abuse and neglect you experienced. Hopefully this little check helps you on your way. And it sucks because within four years, 25% of foster youth who age out of the system will experience homelessness.*

CHAKRABARTI: So that's Russ Lang, who aged out of the foster care system at age 18. Well, joining us now is Glenda Wright. She's in Owensboro, Kentucky. She's a former foster youth who now advocates and works on professional, sorry, and is a working professional on child welfare issues. Glenda Wright, welcome to On Point.

GLENDIA WRIGHT: Thank you so much for having me. It is an honor and a pleasure to be here sitting in this seat, and I thank you all for that.

CHAKRABARTI: Oh, well, we thank you for being with us to help us understand from your first-person perspective, like what, you know, what do you think about these changes that are in the Supporting America's Children and Families Act?

And, you know, had those changes come earlier, how do you think any of them might have had an impact on your life?

WRIGHT: Yes. So I've been in this work for going on 12 years. And so I've been very blessed to see several reinventions. I know Zach mentioned the Family First Act, and now we have an official reauthorization, which has not happened since I aged out of foster care, since I'm 29.

So I aged out of my state at 21. And so I've seen a lot of the changes that were initially implemented at my state. And I'm excited to see those changes on the federal level. Specifically, I work with a lot of foster youth advocates, some that I reached out in preparatory for this speech.

And so that's Natalie Clark and Scout Hartley. And something that we're really passionate about is prevention. Us, in the advocacy world, believe that if we can prevent families and children from even coming into the foster care system, formal care, as we like to say, we do more on the kinship and prevention side, that it not only helps us as individuals and our families, but like representative LaHood said earlier, it also helps the citizens and the tax dollars.

So, the question to really be asked is why haven't we moved to the prevention model? And what's really exciting to think about is what are going to be the deliverables that we're going to see in the impacts now that we are moving to a prevention model. Truly.

CHAKRABARTI: Yeah. I want to come back to what the prevention model actually means in just a second. But may I ask how many years were you in the foster care system?

WRIGHT: So I actually had my first formal touch with the foster care system at two years old. And I was in and out of foster care pretty much my whole life.

But I did do several years in informal kinship care with my grandmother. So she was an informal provider in between when I initially came into care and then she provided kinship care, and she passed away basically a month after I turned 14. And so that is whenever I did my official, I don't know how to say it, my official full-time care with my state's foster care system.

So from the age of 14 until, luckily in my state, we get to age out at 21. And so I aged out at 21. So pretty much my whole entire life, even whenever I was a professional in this work. I've still been in a foster youth.

CHAKRABARTI: Yeah, I'm very sorry to hear about your grandmother passing away like that.

WRIGHT: Thank you.

CHAKRABARTI: Since look, since you have lived this life, I'm just wondering if you want to share with us what that was like.

What was it like for you? I know that's a huge question, but I want people to understand, like, why these changes matter, from someone who's, you know, lived, as you said, a significant amount of your life in the child welfare system. So what was it like for you?

WRIGHT: So I'm going to honor speaking about my under 18 experience.

Typically, I honestly try to avoid that because when I spoke with Russ yesterday, I had the pleasure of speaking to him as well. Our experiences across the boards and cross states, as far as under 18 organically seem to be very similar. And unfortunately, that similarity can be more negative.

And so that was my experience. For example, whenever I was in high school, I was in seven formal placements in four years. So in the critical years of just high school, that was how many moves I had. Now obviously I entered care before high school, but that just kind of gives a really quick picture.

Zach talked to how each move can be traumatic and that speaks to that. We didn't get to hear from Russ on this point, but he also spoke to how every state has a leveling system, from one to five, typically, and how us in foster care are leveled, typically high and it results in a bigger check.

So I know some foster you speak to the fact that we feel as though maybe some foster parents or, I don't want to say it, but maybe a majority of some experiences are that they feel as though people are maybe becoming foster parents due to the money. But then we also see on the flip side there. I also received really good care in some homes, and in those homes, you would need more money, if that makes sense.

But it gets to the impact of, why you're doing the care, right? Why are you being a foster parent? If you're not going to provide those basic necessities that we need, then it can be really profitable, because the state is providing some little bit of money for those services. But if you're a parent and you take that on in a real way, and you do for the foster youth, what you're doing for your real child or your biological child, I should say, then you're going to, it's going to, you're going to need more money.

You're going to need more money, because you're doing what's needed. So that was kind of my experience.

CHAKRABARTI: Yeah. Yeah. So then let's get back to what you were saying earlier, which is the really important part to you, is moving to this prevention model, right? So preventing children from ever having to enter the foster care system.

I mean, what parts of this act do you see as accomplishing that, getting us closer to a prevention model of care?

WRIGHT: Well, honestly, there's a lot in the act that I really feel like hits at that point. I think embedding lived experience is going to hit at that point. I think I'm looking at some financial assistance on the front end for families is going to really hit at that point.

But I think what's really hitting at that point. And I actually did a federal policy paper on this, is the fact that poverty, a lot of studies show that poverty ranges between 60% to 80% of the population of youth that we see in care, like that is the baseline of why they entered care.

So if we look at how we can level down and we can't utilize poverty as a reason for children to enter care, then we're automatically going to see a lot of families diverted. But what we have to be cognitive of, is that we are not

just putting this law into place and we're diverting them with nothing to be diverted to.

Right? So it's not going to do any type of real prevention if we do not have a system of care on the front end, of where we're diverting these people too. And that's exactly what my policy paper talks about. So I just want to caution people, but I am very excited about the potential of what that could mean for us as families and youth and as a body, United States of America.

CHAKRABARTI: Yeah. Okay. So you said about really listening to lived experience as an important part of this act. And that's, I think that's specifically the requirement now in the act that states consult with affected children and parents when crafting child welfare policies. Is that what you were talking about?

WRIGHT: Mm-hm.

CHAKRABARTI: Okay.

WRIGHT: Yes, ma'am.

CHAKRABARTI: Okay. It's interesting. That that wasn't a standard practice beforehand. But on that point, Russ Lang actually mentioned this to us as well. He spent, just to be, to give people more information, he spent 14 years in the child welfare system in Ohio, and he gave us some background on that.

He went into the system when he was four years old because his mother had passed away from a substance abuse disorder. And he aged out, as we talked about a little earlier. And he says that this is the biggest part of the bill, that families will finally get a seat at the table, he says, to better shape the system.

*LANG: When I was growing up, I often felt like my voice went unheard. A lot of caseworkers, a lot of managers, a lot of third party individuals who didn't have*

*care experience, who didn't live in care, who were dictating where my life was going, I felt helpless on a lot of cases.*

*You know, I think it's so important that you have people who are a part of the community come in and make rules and regulations about their own community, because they've seen firsthand how the system is and how it affects us mentally, not only mentally, but emotionally and physically.*

CHAKRABARTI: So that's Russ Lang. Claire Boyd lives just outside of Austin, Texas, and she's been in this system as a foster parent for a year and a half now. And like Russ, she told us that she feels her voice as a foster parent is not heard, and she thinks including caregivers at the table is huge.

CLAIRE BOYD: *There's no formal thing in place saying that a foster parent has to be heard.*

*You know, we've had one judge in the past who actually wanted to hear from foster parents and would let us have an opportunity to speak at the end. There's nothing that gives us a formal voice, which is frustrating. So if that bill can accomplish that, I think that would be great. Not that a foster parent's feelings or attachments to a child should trump the biological parents, because the goal is reunification.*

*But I think if the system could recognize that we're the ones spending the most time with that child, we are seeing them day in and day out. We're seeing how they come home from their visits. We're seeing how they react with caseworkers. We're seeing how they're doing in various therapies, that we have a lot to contribute that might affect how decisions are made if our voice was heard more.*

CHAKRABARTI: So that's Claire Boyd. She's a foster parent who lives just outside of Austin, Texas. Zach Laris, let me bring you back here into the conversation. How would this policy as written in the act actually work in

terms of bringing the voices and experiences of people in the system into the crafting of state level policy?

I mean, that seems there's a question mark there for me.

LARIS: Yeah. So we were talking earlier about the five-year planning process, right? So states put together this plan for the federal government to say, here's what we're going to be doing. And so now going forward, states will be required as they write those plans to engage directly with people like Glenda and Russ and Claire, because they're the real experts here, the folks that have critical information and perspective to provide.

And so that'll look like a variety of things. I think it'll be interesting to see how states operationalize this. And I think it's a huge need going forward for anybody who cares about the success of this law, to be able to engage effectively at the state level. To say, what can we do to make sure we have the best possible partnership for those who have lived experience in the child welfare system, to get the best possible plans.

CHAKRABARTI: So Glenda, you know I wanted, we wanted to do this hour because it's not often that we get to talk about something that really worked in Congress. And made it to the president's desk and has a positive impact on potentially millions of people. But also this isn't a magic wand, right?

It's not completely fixing a system that's in dire need of more funding and more support. So, I mean, what are the areas that you still think need improvement in this system, Glenda?

WRIGHT: Yeah, that's a really big question, as well.

CHAKRABARTI: (LAUGHS) Other than all of it.

WRIGHT: Yes, but of course, I do have a few points. I think what's really important is just like I was telling the person I spoke with yesterday, it's

about for us advocates measured hope.

So foster care advocacy has been around for decades, right? And some of these points that we're making that are now showing up in law have been well established, right? And it seems as though maybe we have to be a little cognate that just because it's being put into law, are we going to make sure that it's appropriately safe, that these families and youth are not being tokenized and abused.

Because, you know, I could speak to a little bit about that in my own story, even with a jurist doctorate, I run against, you know, organizations with power structures where even I'm kind of a victim and so I really have to, you know, call action to that, and make sure that we're implementing this in a way that's safe and appropriate.

So that's one thing that I'm really leery of. I don't see it currently written in where we're going to ensure that states potentially don't abuse that voice continuing, in the families that are impacted. I think something else to really be aware of is, Oh, this might get me in trouble with my local liberal friends, but representative LaHood did have some really good points.

I mean, in the foster care advocacy space, we are also screaming and begging for accountability, for additional oversight. For transparency, because what we're seeing is, you know, some states get this money and they're not using it appropriately. And there's no accountability. There are no systems in place on where there are consequences.

And I think us in the advocacy world are so exhausted by the lack of that, that we're kind of a little bit more frothing at the mouth. We want more. We want more teeth on where we could say, this is your consequences for doing, you know, for hurting us, for harming us, and not creating a system of care.

It's a system of abuse.

*This program aired on January 21, 2025.*



**Paige Sutherland** Producer, On Point  
Paige Sutherland is a producer for On Point.  
[More...](#)



**Meghna Chakrabarti** Host, On Point  
Meghna Chakrabarti is the host of On Point.  
[More...](#)

## Most Popular

---

1

Columbia University student fled the U.S. after her student visa was revoked and ICE came knocking

[Here & Now](#)

2

Lawyer for Fabian Schmidt says his client is in legal 'limbo' while held by ICE

[Local Coverage](#)

3

'We have questions': Mass. residents flood congressional Democrats' town halls, calling for action

[Local Coverage](#)

4

'Nowhere is safe': Doctor in Gaza describes scenes of 'nonstop' injuries after Israel ends ceasefire

[Here & Now](#)

5

Mount Holyoke College president: 'Colleges are not the enemy'

[Here & Now](#)

6

'Money, Lies and God' details how far-right extremists work to erode democracy

[Here & Now](#)