

Child Welfare Needs a New Business Model

It's time to revamp the flawed architecture that has failed our at-risk children and families.

By Congressman Jim Cooper

OF ALL FAILED GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS, THE CHILD welfare system is arguably the worst. Almost no one thinks that government does a good job of raising children, yet over 500,000 children are still in some form of government care. If government is the parent of last resort, then why is it so popular?

The government has received so many young victims for so long that we tend to overlook government's fundamental inability to love, or even to supervise those who are hired to love. Instead of government care being the last destination, it has become—in too many cases—the only destination.

The grotesque architecture of the child welfare system has also failed child welfare workers, just as it has failed their young clients. The designers of that structure are the ones to blame. Architecture determines outcomes. These designers had the best of intentions, and billions of federal and state dollars, but no coherent vision. They have also failed to correct, or even notice, problems when it became obvious that their structure is unsound, even dangerous to the children it was supposed to serve.

Most discouraging has been the disappearance of hope for improvement. Almost no one working within the system knows how to improve the bureaucracy in which they are trapped. Most reformers' thinking has been depressingly incremental. Very few have proposed to "end foster care as we know it" as, for example, happened with welfare reform in 1996. Almost no one has been bold enough to propose fundamental changes that will actually improve the lives of our at-risk children and families.

The Obama administration is a good time to consider completely reforming the system. Leaders of both political parties agree that this is one of the very few bipartisan issues. Congress just recently passed, by voice vote, a little-noticed child welfare reform bill—perhaps the most sweeping in a decade. With our financial system falling apart, and President-elect Obama's pledge to eliminate wasteful government spending, this will not be a good time for child welfare advocates to ask for more money to fund programs that they know aren't working.

This is a good time, therefore, to rethink what it is we're trying to do for these children and families, and how we could do it better. An interesting place to start is to consider how much money we spend on each child, and where that money actually goes. In many states, the annual average cost of funding the child welfare bureaucracy is between \$30,000 and \$60,000 per child. Of course, the children see almost nothing of this cash, and foster parents get approximately \$4,800 per child, per year. This means governmental "overhead" is between 84 percent and 92 percent. Even if you factor in caseworker salaries, which average little more than \$20,000, the bureaucratic overhead is between 18 percent and 59 percent.

Consider this too: The \$9+ billion in annual federal government spending on child welfare flows from a bewildering array of up to 30 separate programs. The implicit theory of child welfare work seems to be that specialization works, and that you can't have too many layers of supervision. As opposed to traditional parenting, in which one individual performs multiple roles, often simultaneously, seamlessly and without supervision, child welfare practice emphasizes teams of experts. But these experts often forget the child's name.

Child welfare—and by that I mean the whole community of child welfare reformers—needs an entirely new business model before any meaningful changes will be made. From my perspective as a federal legislator, this means we should begin to:



- reorganize and streamline the patchwork of child welfare programs that are failing our children;
- reduce enormous bureaucracies in order to make it easier for our children and families to access the services they need;
- incentivize states to produce better outcomes, not just document procedures; and
- spend our taxpayers' money to actually benefit the children, not just maintain the bureaucracies.

We need to define a coherent vision for our child welfare programs, and with that, a system that will match it. Improving the future of these precious children is the priority. They need to be loved. It is our duty to find them that love.

Jim Cooper (D-Tenn.) has represented Nashville and surrounding areas in the U.S. House of Representatives since 2002. He serves on the Armed Services, Budget, and Oversight and Government Reform committees. An attorney and Rhodes scholar, Cooper was first elected at the age of 28 to represent Tennessee's Fourth Congressional District (1983-95). Today, in addition to serving in Congress (Tenn., 5th District), he teaches graduate-level health policy at Vanderbilt University's Owen School of Management.