

June 22, 2016  
For Immediate Release

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## **Illinois Department of Children and Family Services Encourages Speedy Passage of H.R. 5456**

**SPRINGFIELD, Ill.** – The U.S. House of Representatives this week approved H.R. 5456, the Family First Prevention Services Act, to give Illinois and other states substantially more flexibility and federal support to keep families together and avoid reliance on foster care. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services stands in strong support of this legislation.

“This landmark legislation, years in the making, will help the Department achieve its primary goal of effectively working with families and children in crisis to prevent children from entering foster care,” said Department of Children and Family Services Director George Sheldon in a letter to the Illinois Congressional Delegation. “This legislation is not only good for children and families, but for federal and state budgets as well. The evidence of what works in child welfare is almost universal in focusing on early intervention. Over the long term, evidence-based prevention services reduce the need for costly, long-term foster care and will improve outcomes for children and families.”

The legislation is a dramatic change in federal support for states’ child welfare programs. For decades, the federal government has shared the cost of children in foster care but has offered little support for programs that help keep children out of foster care by helping troubled families. The new legislation provides federal matching dollars for programs that preserve families.

The legislation also limits state reliance on long-term residential treatment facilities rather than community-based family-type placements, including foster homes. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services has been implementing this under the Rauner Administration by gradually transferring 350 children and youth to group homes and foster care.

The Family First Prevention Act was introduced on Friday, June 10, 2016 with strong bipartisan support. Ranking Republicans and Democrats on the House Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Finance Committee of Congress led the effort. On Tuesday, June 21, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 5456 without opposition. The legislation now moves to the U.S. Senate.

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*Please see attached letter of support from Director Sheldon to the Illinois Congressional Delegation.*

June 21, 2016

Dear Members of the Illinois Congressional Delegation:

On behalf of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, I write in appreciation for the introduction and speedy consideration of H.R. 5456, the Family First Prevention Services Act. This landmark legislation, years in the making, will help the Department achieve its primary goal of effectively working with families and children in crisis to prevent children from entering foster care.

The Family First Prevention Services Act allows states to invest federal foster care funds in evidence-based prevention services. This ends the counter-productive policy under which the federal government has provided long-term funding for kids in foster care, rather than spending to keep kids out of foster care. The legislation aims to reduce inappropriate congregate care placements and strengthens kinship navigator programs to ensure that kids can remain with family whenever possible. By reducing the bureaucracy in licensing foster homes, the bill also will help attract good foster parents.

This legislation is not only good for children and families, but for federal and state budgets as well. The evidence of what works in child welfare is almost universal in focusing on early intervention. Over the long term, evidence-based prevention services reduce the need for costly, long-term foster care and will improve outcomes for children and families.

Governor Bruce Rauner has made it a priority to improve Illinois' child welfare system and DCFS has taken significant strides to do so. Over the past year, the Department has reduced the number of children in shelter care by 50 percent. With improved technology, DCFS has streamlined bureaucratic processes so our caseworkers can assist more families quickly and efficiently. Ahead of the policy included in H.R. 5456, at the state level we have worked to limit the length of time children are in congregate care and have moved 350 youth from residential facilities to foster care or other family settings. Those savings have been reinvested back into serving more kids.

Growing up in a program and not in a home leaves a hole in the heart of a foster child. A home is more than a place to live; it is a feeling of belonging. We want more of our youth to grow up with that feeling of belonging to a family. In order to do so, we need to help families long before they reach the crisis that prompts DCFS to intervene and take their children. I firmly believe this legislation will help us to accomplish this and ensure that all foster children find their “forever” home.

I thank you for your time and urge you to support this important legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "George H. Sheldon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "G".

George Sheldon  
Director  
Illinois Department of Children and Families