

# The Time is Now for Senate to Pass Family First Prevention Services Act

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**For decades**, child welfare reform has had strong bipartisan support, even during times when heated partisanship has divided Congress on national matters. Several of Michigan's own U.S Representatives and Senators have been among the most active leaders in shaping improved child welfare policy over that time.

We, and they, should be proud of those efforts. Now, before the end of 2016, Congress has the opportunity to act on a critical bill that would help Michigan expand its work to keep children safely with their families, preventing the need for foster care.

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) is a bipartisan compromise that recently passed the House with overwhelming support. Children's advocates, medical professionals, foster youth, child welfare professionals, and the legislative sponsors of the bill have all worked together to craft the compromise legislation. Michigan's Children considers this a necessary step forward, despite the need for many more steps to follow.

The U.S. Senate has yet to act on the bill, and Senators need to now work quickly and without delay to adopt the bill into law. As an organization that works to build support for public policy in the best interest of children, youth and families, we urge them to do just that.



By helping to stabilize families, this landmark child welfare bill would add some tools for states to be able to better care for families with children in danger of entering the foster care system, as well as children who are already in it. When children remain with families, studies show that they are safer, have better academic outcomes, and grow up to lead normal, healthier lives.

Under the FFPSA, federal resources could be used to provide these services earlier, to keep a child from being removed and help the family stay together. And, resources could be used to expand services for young adults making their way into independence after spending time in the foster care system.

The FFPSA will provide:

- New federal support for prevention services for vulnerable families to care for their children;
- Ongoing support for placing children in family-like settings when foster care is necessary;
- Improvements to the quality of residential treatment programs;
- Priority services to children and youth who are the most vulnerable – victims of sex trafficking, those recovering from substance abuse, and those who have been diagnosed with mental illness; and
- Expanded access to services for young people in the foster care system and existing out of that system, including better education and training supports and specific supports for pregnant and parenting youth.

Right now, states cannot easily use existing federal funding to help stabilize families because these funds are targeted toward the costs of caring for a child already in foster care. In addition, transitional services are limited.

Michigan has made strong efforts in family preservation and reunification over the past several years with a federal waiver that allows the state to utilize federal funding that otherwise would have been exclusively for foster care. These efforts have begun to show success, but they have been limited to a few areas in Michigan and have not been able to finance the wide array of services needed to help families who more often than not face multiple challenges. And resources for young adults aging out of the foster care system are extremely limited.

Michigan's Children has long advocated for allocating more state funds to keep families together, resources that have been decimated over the last decade or so. Our over-reliance on federal funding for all child welfare services including foster care makes the FFPSA even more important for our current efforts, while we continue to push for additional state resources to allow more flexibility in how we serve families across the state. These needed but inadequately funded services include quality mental health and substance abuse prevention and treatment, and in-home parenting skills programs.

The most vulnerable children, youth and their families throughout Michigan should no longer have to wait for these important reforms. Join Michigan's Children, our Michigan Senators and organizations and advocates throughout the nation to urge other Senate leaders to act quickly and decisively to support the Family First Prevention Services Act.

**Michele Corey** is the vice president of programs for [Michigan's Children](#), a member of the [State Policy and Advocacy Reform Center](#) (SPARC) Peer Learning Network. SPARC is an initiative that aims to improve outcomes for children and families involved with the child welfare system by building the capacity of and connections between state child welfare advocates.