

Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Neal,

Thank you for your work leading this committee and for your efforts to learn more about the issues that our nations' families face. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you and the committee my passion for helping foster youth and opportunities to improve their lives and maximize their potential.

My passion for this issue stems from my desire to provide opportunities to our nations' foster youth and from personal experience. When I was 5, my mother and I left an abusive home in the middle of the night. Growing up, I was in and out of battered women's shelters. Although those years were some of the most challenging in my life, I knew I had my mom by my side every step of the way.

Unfortunately, my story is not the same for the thousands of children in foster care today. The foster care system has seen children that are taken away from their homes in preventable circumstances and situations in which foster children missing from state foster care systems cannot be located. As a member of the Congressional Foster Youth Caucus, I believe that there are ways to address these issues and ensure that our nation's foster youth receive the care that they deserve. This is why I introduced the *Find and Protect Foster Youth Act*, which would help remove obstacles in identifying and responding to children who go missing while in foster care, also known as "runaways".

Youth in the foster care system are some of the most at-risk children for substance abuse, trafficking, and other exploitation due to instances of unsuccessful placements, trauma, neglect, abuse, and other negative social and behavioral conditions. The 17-21 age population is also at a higher risk of trafficking and homelessness. In 2020, about 43% of 21-year-old National Youth in Transition Database respondents had experienced homelessness. A total of 390,000 children were in foster care in 2021. Of that population, about 4,115 children, were designated as runaway.

However, data on runaways are often inaccurate and incomplete. Some cases are preemptively closed, and the lack of accurate data collection can lead to misunderstandings about the child welfare system and its efficacy. Long-term data analysis suggests the prevalence of runaway episodes is much higher.

Currently, state and tribal governments are required to develop and implement prevention and care for missing foster youth. These protocols do not currently include plans for locating any child missing from foster care, determining the factors that contributed to the child's decision to run away, evaluating the child's experience when absent from care including screening for sex trafficking, and reporting these findings.

*The Find and Protect Foster Youth Act* addresses this issue by requiring the Department of Health and Human Services to find obstacles in identifying and responding to missing children in existing foster care systems. This bill seeks to accomplish this by requiring:

- An evaluation of states protocols in determining the location of missing foster youth,

- Information and assistance related to eliminating obstacles for addressing missing foster youth,
- A report to congress on the results of the evaluation; and
- Screenings for children who return to foster care to determine if the children were victims of sex trafficking during their absence.

There are various issues within the foster care system that need to be addressed. For too long, foster youth have faced circumstances that impede their abilities to experience safe and fulfilling lives. I believe that my bill is a step in the right direction to help this population and would appreciate your support in getting it passed.

Thank you.