



INTRODUCTION

CWLA is pleased to submit *Hope for America's Children, Youth, and Families* to President Barack Obama and the 111th Congress. During this transition for a new president and Congress, CWLA offers policymakers a vision and recommendations that address both legislative and administrative efforts to improve child welfare services and, ultimately, advance the well-being of the country's most vulnerable families and children. As the nation enters a new era, we believe Americans have the creativity, expertise, and perseverance to address the challenges these families face so all children and youth reach their ultimate potential and achieve the great American dream.

Hope for America's Children, Youth, and Families reflects the collective wisdom, insights, and concerns of CWLA's public and private member agencies gathered over the past half year. These agencies, small and large, provide an array of child welfare and related services to vulnerable children, youth, and families in cities and communities across all 50 states. This document is also based on a review of our policies, best practice guidance, and advocacy positions researched and crafted over the past several years. Although this document is based on our cumulative knowledge and work over the past half of 2008, clearly much has changed in our country during this time period.

In fall 2008, Congress enacted the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections Act, P.L. 110-351). This legislation is the most significant federal child welfare legislation enacted in at least a decade—if not since the creation of Title IV-E foster care and adoption assistance in 1980. This bill, when fully phased in, will have a significant impact on outcomes for children in foster care and special-needs adoptions across the country. It begins the critical task of focusing on the disproportionate overrepresentation of some minority populations in child welfare by providing federal funding to some kinship families and by allowing direct access to tribal governments—and, by extension, to children in Indian country. It also holds the promise of improving education and health care access for children in care and moving this nation, at least in some small way, toward a sounder workforce development policy in the area of child welfare.

The Fostering Connections Act offers opportunity, but the economic crisis threatens the ability of state and local agencies, both public and private, to take advantage of these opportunities. Many if not all states are considering significant budget cuts. In the coming weeks, assessing how human services can be protected from budget cuts, at the very time when human need will increase, will be critical. This will almost certainly extend to the challenge of child abuse and neglect. Also critical will be implementing and regulating the Fostering Connections to Success Act in a way that recognizes this dynamic. The economy will challenge state and local agencies in many different ways; we must shape federal policy over the next year in a way that takes this into account.

Despite these challenges, we offer this document as a detailed blueprint that, carried out over both the short and long term, can create a strong vision for this country's most vulnerable children and families—and all of America's families. CWLA envisions a future in which families, communities, organizations, and governments ensure all children and youth benefit from the resources they need to grow into healthy, contributing members of society. Child welfare services must be available to families whenever concerns arise about the safety and well-being of children. A network of community-based, family-centered organizations, whose mission is to support and stabilize children, youth, and families, with appropriate sensitivity to family culture, will provide these services.

CWLA's ultimate goal is to achieve better outcomes for the children and families who encounter the child welfare system by

- preventing abuse and neglect;
- providing health and mental health services to address the impact of harm;
- preventing unnecessary separation of children from their homes;
- sustaining permanent placements that are made;
- minimizing how long children remain in foster care, should placement be necessary; and
- ensuring no disproportionate effect on children or families of any culture.