

Foster Care Event
4-H Club, DC
September 11, 1998

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

**First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Remarks at Destination Future '98**

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Thank you. Thank you Joy and thank you all for inviting me to be here. I am very happy and delighted to be here with Joy and Erica on the stage, and all of you who are using your experience and energy on behalf of yourselves and other young people in the foster care system and those who have transitioned out of it, looking for ways to use your experience to make all of our systems, and the lives that they affect, better.

I want to thank Carol Williams for her leadership and her stalwart advocacy on behalf of children and youth. I have had the pleasure of working with Carol over a number of years now and many of the changes that we try to make on behalf of a better improved foster care and adoption system are because of her dedication.

I want to thank Jim Walker and all of you who are associated with the National Resource Center for caring about this extraordinarily important group of people in our country. I want to thank Donna Hughes for the National Network which I think is one of the best ways we can keep the issues of foster care, adoption and our systems that affect young people on the front burner.

As Joy mentioned, I was privileged to meet with a group of young people who were active in the California Youth Connection. And I was so impressed. My staff, my friends, my husband and my daughter know that I have talked about that meeting many times since then. I was impressed by the intelligence, the thoughtfulness and honesty of those young people who were still in the foster care system and those who have aged out of it.

And I came away from that meeting even more committed to do whatever I can do to try and make sure that your voices are heard. Because there isn't any doubt in my mind that after having been involved with foster care for more than twenty eight or nine years now, that there are any voices that are more important than yours.

And I have a feeling that this is the right time for those voices to be heard. That the issues that you will discuss this weekend will not just be left here when you go back to your states and communities but they will serve as a blueprint for what else we need to be doing here in Washington and in state capitals with organizations like the Resource Center and in networks around our country.

I thought a lot about why I have been so committed to and concerned about foster care for so many years. And I think it is for a number of reasons. I knew growing up that my mother had not been in formal foster care, but she had found it impossible to remain with her parents who were both teenagers when she was born many years ago. She was sent to live with a set of her grandparents, and that did not work out, so she went to work in the home of a family where she worked for room and board and a place to live, helping to take care of the children of that family. And that is how she got through high school.

When she ended high school, she had nowhere to go, and she didn't feel that she had a family that she could go to. When I was growing up, we often had the help of young women who were on the brink of aging out the foster care system -- not from any foster home with a family, but from what we would now call a group home. So, three or four of these young women would come and work with my mother as she had been worked with when she was a young woman.

My mother has often told me how grateful she is to the woman with whom she lived because she got to see a real family. She got to watch what happens inside a home where parents and children went through all they should go through in a family, because she never had that. And she wanted to give that opportunity to other young women as well.

When I was in law school, I now refer to it as Joy's law school -- Yale Law School -- I began working with legal services in New Haven, Connecticut. And the cases that came my way were cases involving foster children. Difficult cases of trying to decide if children should remain with that child's biological parents, to be put into foster care to be adopted out of foster care or sent to group homes -- all of the issues you have struggled with first hand.

And I saw through the cases that I handled, in the children and adults I represented, how difficult it was to make the decision that was best for the children. And often it wasn't a matter of people being mean spirited or malicious, it was just that they

were very difficult decision.

And so for all of those years since then, I have tried to keep my attention on the foster care system. But I don't think that any one of us who have worked in it all these years really had the benefit of an organized way of hearing from the people who truly had the most to say about it -- those of you who had seen that system in a very personal way.

I wanted to come today to do several things. To ask you to be as honest and as helpful as you possibly can this weekend and throughout the year. To make sure that every decision-maker in every community, state and at the national level, knows what you know. And we will do what we can to amplify your voices so that your knowledge carries as far as possible.

Secondly, I think it is time for those of you who are on the front-line with this expertise to become our partners in improving and reporting these systems. As Carol Williams said, you have made progress, and I am very grateful for that progress. The administration, particularly the President, has brought to the forefront issues of foster care and adoption that had never been there before.

We have had events in the Oval Office at the White House where foster children, foster parents, social workers and advocates gathered to get the message out to our countries about how many children are in foster care and what their -- what their needs are.

We have passed laws like the Family and Medical Leave Law which encourages and gives time off to parents who adopt a child. We've provided a tax credit and an even higher tax credit to families who adopt children with medical or other problems. We have worked very hard to make foster care and adoption free from discrimination based on race, culture and ethnicity.

And last year, there was a historic step taken on behalf of foster care and adoption when, after a lot of hard work by many people, the President signed the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. That Act is aimed at improving the foster care and adoption system and particularly improving the decision-making process, so that a decision can be made in a more orderly, effective and a timely manner, as to whether a child can return home, whether a child should be and can be placed for

adoption and then be placed as quickly as possible to create permanent solutions.

When the President signed that bill he said that we have laid the building blocks of what children should have as their basic fundamental rights -- a decent safe home, an honorable, orderly, positive upbringing -- a chance to live out their dreams and their God-given capacities.

So there has been progress. But I am not here to tell you that we have made anywhere near the progress we need to or we have to. Certainly what was done in the bill that was signed last year will help us move toward our national goal of doubling our national adoption rate. We want the laws to be friendly to people who are in the process of adopting, and we have put into place some safeguards and changes that we hope will make that possible.

For example, the bill shortens the time that a state has to place kids in permanent homes. It strengthens supports to help keep families together when that is possible, and when it is not, to make the decision to move on.

Most importantly, the legislation makes the health and safety of children the first priority. There are over 100,000 young children in our foster care system. That is way too many. We have to be more creative and more determined to do whatever we can to bring those numbers down, because we know there are many unmet needs of those children who are in our foster care system. But one of those needs that has not gotten the attention it deserves is what happens when you age out the system. And that is what I heard a lot about when I met with the group of young people in California last year.

About 65,000 young people like yourselves will age out the system in the next three years. What can we do better to help you to help them? I heard a lot of advice last year and we are attempting to act on that. We want to address the important needs that young people face when their eighteenth birthday arrives.

That is why I am pleased today to announce a series of grants -- more than \$1 million devoted to making state and local programs that serve young people to work better for the young people they serve. These grants from the Department of Health and Human Services are aimed at giving nine states more assistance in strengthening how they deal with young people.

We want to do a better job in independent living. We want to do a better job in making sure you have the services you need as you transition out and afterward.

We know very well, and I have heard from numbers of young people who are on the brink or who have already aged out of the system, that you face extraordinary challenges.

Many foster youth face homelessness or difficulty finishing high school or enrolling in college or finding a job. And great difficulty in meeting health care needs, which means that you have nowhere to turn and will be uninsured, and are not getting those skills you require to live independently.

Now we know there are programs around the country that are working, and we want to hear honestly from you what works and what doesn't work. I learned for example, that because of advocacy of foster youth around our country programs in Texas and Florida promote college tuition assistance to young people in foster care. In Los Angeles County, set-aside entry level jobs are available for those who are aging out of foster care. Massachusetts has a teen parent transitional living program to help young mothers who are aging out of foster care with parenting and transitional living assistance.

And the California Youth Connection is becoming a national model of how to bring young teens and older young people together to form a network of support and advocacy. We are finally seeing some movement on behalf of older foster youth and those that have transitioned out. So this is a perfect time for you to be meeting to give us advice and to organize yourselves so that you can be sure to have an impact on the policies that are set.

We must strengthen the Federal Independent Living Program which provides 85,000 young people with critical help on their transition to independence. It helps young people like yourselves get a high school diploma and access to vocational training. It helps you learn the daily living schools that we all need like budgeting and finding a place to live.

But we have to review this program and evaluate its effectiveness and we need your help. Now some adults have a hard time admitting that being an adult doesn't mean that we have all the answers. We know we don't. We certainly can't pretend

in front of you that we do. We want you to help us find the best possible answer to the issues and challenges we face.

I believe that the American people need to know more about our foster care system and particularly those who are aging out of it. Most Americans don't know. But if they do know, we have found that they are responsive. More than three quarters of citizens polled about foster care strongly supported services that assist teens that are making that transition, and even said that they would be willing to pay more taxes to provide job placement, college tuition assistance and housing.

But if we don't get the information out to them, and your stories aren't told and your experiences aren't shared, then people won't know. And I want to emphasize something that Joy mentioned when she introduced me. I imagine that many of you who have been in foster care spend a considerable amount of time trying to avoid telling people that -- trying to pretend it wasn't so. And it may seem perhaps a little odd to be asked to share your experiences now, to talk about what you learned and what you saw or what could be better. But we have no better resources than each of you.

I remember very well the big event in the East Room of the White House a few years ago. I invited various states to come with children who were in the foster care system who were waiting for adoption. And I wanted Americans to know that there were a lot of good, smart, saavy, sweet young people who were in our foster care system who would be an asset to any family.

One young woman from Kansas came with a poem she had written. And she stood up and she talked about her experience of being taken away from her family because of abuse, and how she was abandoned. From the time I was in the White House, she was thirteen and had been in five or six foster homes and because of various situations she was living in a group home.

She stood up to read her poem. She said she really didn't want a lot. She said "I want a place that I can call home. A place that I can call my own. A family I can love that loves me back." Somebody heard that poem and decided to adopt her.

I want every American to hear those words and be heard. Just as I listened to the stories of my mother and saw how determined she was that the family she had would never have the problems that she faced. I think there is a lot of people in

America who want to hear about your brilliance and hope and grit and determination. And I for one, whenever I can, will make sure those lessons and your voices get heard.

Thank you all very much.