

**PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION**

Foster Care Event,

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AND THE FIRST LADY
AT FOSTER CARE EVENT

Presidential Hall

5:45 P.M. EST

MRS. CLINTON: Welcome to the White House, and please be seated. This is a truly wonderful day. In a few minutes the President will sign into law landmark legislation that will strengthen our foster care system, and give hope and help to thousands of young people struggling to make a safe transition to adulthood and independence.

None of this would have been possible without so many of you in this room. I want to thank Secretary Donna Shalala and her team at HHS, including Mary Burdette and Pat Montoya; and former commissioner, Carol Williams. I want to thank many members of Congress, and particularly those who are here with us today -- Senator Rockefeller and Senator Collins, Senator Chafee, and Representative Cardin.

I want to thank Mayor Williams and his mother, Virginia, who welcomed him into her family when he was 3 years old and authorities were about to declare him unadoptable. They are among the best advertisements for the rewards and possibilities of adoption in America.

I want to thank the Child Welfare League of America, the Children's Defense Fund, and all of the tireless child advocates who work to raise awareness about this issue. The Casey Family Program and the Annie E. Casey Foundation have give great support to young people in transition.

And I'd also like very much to thank someone who I'm sure is with us in spirit, the late Senator John Chafee. (Applause.) On the Friday before he died, I called Senator Chafee to wish him a happy birthday. I also managed to do a little lobbying for the Foster Care Independence Act, which had hit a few roadblocks in the Senate. By the end of our conversation, I think we were both feeling reenergized and inspired to work even harder for the young people who were counting on this bill.

I understand that one of his last instructions to his staff was to set up meetings with senators he felt could be swayed to support the bill. We all know that had he lived, John

Chafee would not have rested until he had won all of the votes he needed. So we are very grateful today to be joined by his colleagues and, particularly, his son, Senator Lincoln Chafee.

Since the President took office we have seen a transformation in America's efforts to strengthen our foster care and adoption systems. With the Family and Medical Leave Act, we've helped adoptive parents, and all new parents, take time off to care for their children without fear of losing their jobs or their health insurance. We've put an end to racial discrimination in adoption, prohibiting agencies from denying qualified parents of one race to adopt a child of another.

In 1997, we passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act, which cut dramatically the amount of time a child can spend in foster care, and set an ambitious goal of doubling the number of annual adoptions by the year 2002. And, as the President was able to announce just a few months ago, in September, we are well on our way to meeting that goal.

But it wasn't long after we passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act that we recognized we needed now to turn our efforts to a new challenge: helping those young people, who never did have the opportunity either to return home or be placed in a permanent family, fulfill their promise in adulthood.

Now, for many Americans, the 18th birthday is an important one. Turning 18 means you can vote. It means you can often go away to get a job or to school. But it should never mean that you're left on your own. For too many young people, turning 18 has been just the beginning of a lonely and sometimes harrowing journey toward adulthood. Just half of all young people who have aged out of foster care complete high school. Fewer than one in three have health care coverage. One in four have been homeless.

Two years ago, I went to California to meet a group of young people who had aged out of foster care. They told me about being forced out of their foster homes on their birthdays; about staying in a cold dorm room alone during the holidays because they had nowhere to go; about getting sick and having no insurance to get any medical care; about having literally no one to call for any kind of help.

They reminded me of the many small things we all take for granted in our own families. One young woman said to me, you know, it's almost Thanksgiving, and I have no one to call and ask how to bake a turkey.

I've been very moved and humbled by the resilience and determination I've seen in the young people I've met. Some of them are standing behind me. One is Joy Warren, who spent all of her teen years in foster care. Yet, she still found the commitment and strength not only to continue her education in college, but to attend the law school and become a powerful voice for foster children around America.

I think of Terry Harak, whom I had the honor of meeting at the White House last January. On her 18th birthday, in the middle of her senior year, she found herself without foster

care, without a job and without a place to call home, because the rule has been you're out of foster care if you turn 18 or you finish high school, whichever happens first.

But Terry didn't give up. She spent the night at teachers' and friends' houses and metro terminals, even in hospital emergency rooms. And every morning she would wake up and get herself to school. And last June she graduated and today she is working and is a student in college.

But for every Terry or every Joy or any of the other success stories behind me, think of all those young people who don't finish high school and who risk slipping through the cracks of our society. That is why, last winter, I was very pleased to unveil a new proposal in the President's budget that would extend the foster care safety net to the young people who have aged out of the foster care system, but still need our help. And today I'm very pleased that that bill is about to become law.

The Foster Care Independence Act recognizes one fundamental principle: All of us must take responsibility for helping these young people build lives worthy of their spirit and potential. From this day forward we say to all Americans, no young person, especially those who have not known the support of a safe, loving, permanent family, should have to make the passage to adulthood alone.

This has been a truly bipartisan achievement. And I want to thank everyone in Congress who helped, the former foster children who stepped forward to make their stories known, the newspapers and television stations that publicized their plight, the researchers who backed up their heartbreaking stories with hard statistics, and the advocates and private citizens who lobbied the Congress. In this season of giving, I can think of no better gift to give our children and our future.

Now I'm very proud to introduce two people who can tell us why this law is so important. Alfred Perez is one of the eloquent young people I met two years ago in California. He will speak first. He will be followed by Kristi Jo Frazier, of Cincinnati, Ohio. Both of them will tell us more about their challenges, and even more importantly, about their capacity to persist, their resilience, and their triumphs.

Please welcome Alfred Perez. (Applause.)

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Thank you, please be seated. At this moment, about all I can think of is, Merry Christmas. (Laughter.)

Senator Rockefeller; Senator Collins, Representative Cardin, thank you all for being here. And, Senator Chafee, thank you for being here, and with you, the spirit of your father, for all his great work on this.

I want to say a special word of thanks to our Mayor, Tony Williams, and his mom, Mrs. Virginia Williams. He has become America's Exhibit A of the potential for foster care success. He is a good man and she is a magnificent woman, and we thank them for being here. Thank you. (Applause.)

I thank Secretary Shalala and all of her staff. And I thank Alfred Perez and Kristi Jo Frazier, and the other young people behind me, for whom they spoke. They spoke so well and so bravely and so frankly. What they have achieved in their own lives is truly heroic, and we should all be very grateful that they are determined to make that kind of difference in the lives of other young people.

I want to thank the groups that have done so much to champion the cause of foster children -- the Child Welfare League of America, the Children's Defense Fund, the Annie Casey Foundation, the Casey Family Program. I want to thank especially -- I won't mention them, but they know who they are -- the people who have come up to me personally and lobbied me on this issue over the last couple of years. (Laughter.)

I've got a cousin that's been a friend of mine over 50 years; all my life; we were little kids together. She runs a public housing program in the little town in Arkansas where we were born. And she came up here to a HUD conference on kids aging out of foster care. And she spent the night with me at the White House. I got up the next morning -- I never know, you know, what's on her mind -- this is about a year ago. And she said, Bill, you have got to do something about these kids that are aging out of foster care. She said, it's a huge problem in New York and California, but believe it or not, it's a problem at home, too. And nobody's doing anything about it. I want to thank all those people, and they know who they are.

And most of all, I want to thank Hillary. (Applause.) When we were in law school, she worked at the Yale Child Studies Center. Her first job was with what became the Children's Defense Fund. When I became governor, in my first term she founded the Arkansas Advocates for Families and Children. She has always cared more about the welfare of all of our children than anything else, and our mutual responsibilities to them. And she challenged us a long time ago not to forget those foster children who leave the system each year with no financial or emotional support, no one to turn to. She put a lot of herself into getting this bill passed

Hillary likes to quote the Chilean poet and teacher, Gabriela Mistral, about our responsibility to children: "Many things we need can wait. The child cannot. Now is the time his bones are formed, his mind is developed. To him, we cannot say 'tomorrow.' His name is 'today.'"

We are here today because all of you, and especially the members of Congress from both parties, stood as one to say that America's foster children can finally have the name, 'today.'

The Foster Care Independence Act expands access to health care, education, housing and counseling for young people who must leave foster care when they turn 18. For the very first time, states will be able to pay housing costs and health insurance for people under 21.

The bill also gives states more resources and flexibility to help former foster children finish high school and go on to college; to help young people get jobs and vocational training; to provide counseling for young people learning to live on their own -- you've already heard how important that is -- and above all, to make sure young adults leaving foster care know they are not out there alone.

The bill makes \$700 million available to the states over five years under very flexible conditions. I challenge the states to use every penny of it. And I know I can depend upon the advocates here -- (laughter) -- to make sure they do.

You also have to help the states, though -- to design good programs, to implement them so the money will be spent with maximum impact. We simply cannot afford to have our high school students sleeping in metro stations, as some of these young people had to do.

We cannot afford to lose our future entrepreneurs and teachers and lawyers to the kinds of obstacles the young people behind me have faced. We can't afford to give up on the future, and these young people are a big part of our future, and our shared responsibility.

We have tried to help America's most vulnerable children grow up healthy and safe, to make the transition into happy, productive adults. We've tried to encourage adoption so that we can end the sadness of young people shuttling from house to house and never knowing a home. We've made adoptions easier and more affordable, given states more flexibility, passed incentive programs for states to promote adoption. These worked so well we actually ran out of money to reward the states. (Laughter.)

I'm pleased that this bill also authorizes additional funds that program needs, because it is working. Our most recent figures show that adoptions are up 29 percent, the first significant increase in two decades. (Applause.)

Now, when we get to the end of the session, sometimes we have to combine a bunch of things in bills, just to get all our work done. And I want to mention one other thing this bill does that is unrelated to young people aging out of foster care or to adoption. This bill includes a provision to honor and assist veterans from other lands who fought with and as a part of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. It creates a special cash benefit under Social Security for veterans who want to leave the United States and return to their homelands.

We have 10 such veterans, 10 Filipino veterans, who are here with us today. I want to thank them for their service, and I ask them to stand and be recognized. We thank you. (Applause.)

So this bill keeps a promise to our children and a promise to our veterans. It was passed with overwhelming support from both parties, proving that we can put partisanship aside, and when we do, it's good for America.

I hope that we will see more of this in the new year. I hope that we can use the historic millennial year to take the rest of the steps we need to deal with the aging of America, by securing Social Security and Medicare, to give our children health coverage, to raise the minimum wage, to pass the common-sense legislation on gun safety and hate crimes, to do the things that we need to do to support working family, including the patients' bill of rights.

These young people here should give us all a lot of courage -- and a lot of heart. They represent, out of the most difficult circumstances, the very best not only of our country, but of what is at the core of human nature. And in this special season for so many of the world's great religious faiths, we should be very grateful for the gifts they have given us, the gifts they will give us, and the gifts so many other children will be able to give because of this legislation.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

Now I'd like to ask the members of Congress to come up here, we'll sign the bill.

(The bill is signed.) (Applause.)

END

6:20 P.M. EST