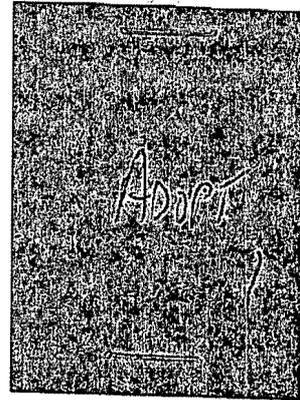


ADOPTION



AS PREPARED

FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
REMARKS FOR THE W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION
FAMILIES FOR KIDS BY 2002 CONFERENCE
WASHINGTON, DC
JUNE 26, 1997



It is a pleasure to be in the company of so many men and women who have contributed their talents and energies to the critical issue of adoption. Over the years, the Kellogg Foundation has made an unparalleled commitment to improving our foster care and adoption systems, and I am particularly grateful for the Foundation's participation in a discussion I held at the White House last summer about this subject.

Let me thank all of you involved with Kellogg and *Families for Kids* for your leadership in drawing attention to the plight of hundreds of thousands of children across our country who are needlessly languishing in foster care -- and for serving as models of what can be done to improve the child welfare system and bring more hope and security to children so desperately in need of both.

Not only are you heroes to countless children who have benefited from your efforts, you are breaking new ground for elected officials and policy makers -- in Washington and elsewhere -- who have much to learn from your example.

This conference could not be more timely. After years of inattention and partisan politics, we are finally forging a bipartisan consensus on Capitol Hill that could correct some of the most glaring flaws in the adoption process. Today we are within reach of bringing some common sense and compassion to an overburdened, understaffed and outdated foster care system.

Those of you who have worked on children's welfare issues -- as I have for the last 25 years -- have heard no shortage of stories about children who are shuttled from one foster home to another during their formative years.

I will never forget a case I handled about 15 years ago in Arkansas.

I represented a couple who wanted to adopt a four-year-old boy who had been in their foster care for three years. The boy had been badly neglected as a baby by his biological mother, who had psychological problems. When he was less than a year old, she turned him over to the local social service agency so she could follow a boyfriend to another state. At that point, the baby showed all the symptoms of severe mistreatment: he had gained little weight, he was unresponsive and he shied away from human contact.

But in his foster family, he began to thrive. And his foster parents fell in love with him. Even though they had signed the customary state contract prohibiting them from adopting him, they wanted to make him a permanent member of their family.

The state adoption agency refused their request. So the boy was going to be taken from the security of the family he knew and turned over to strangers on some adoption list. Meanwhile, the boy's birth mother filed suit to get him back, claiming she had overcome her problems.

I argued on behalf of the boy's foster parents that the best interests of the child should take precedence over both the birth mother's claims of her biological rights and the state's claims to its contractual agreement. I asked the judge to allow testimony from a child psychologist about the boy's progress in his foster family and about the possible consequences to his physical, intellectual and emotional development if he was separated from them. The judge, who had children and grandchildren of his own, didn't think he had much to learn from these witnesses, but he allowed them nonetheless. In the end, the psychologist's testimony weighed heavily in the judge's determination to allow the foster parents to adopt the boy.

Just as often, however, the child's best interests do not take precedence. And this sad reality is repeated throughout our nation. Antiquated rules and rigid presumptions continue to deny countless children the lasting family connections that can influence whether a child does well in school, stays away from drugs, and goes on to become a responsible, law-abiding adult.

Only recently have we begun to view issues regarding the health and safety of children in foster care through a clear lens -- instead of a fog of distortions and political rhetoric over what constitutes real "family values."

Clearly, no one wants children to be in situations where they are subjected to abuse, torture, starvation or neglect. In 1973, when I was just entering the world of children's advocacy and the law, I wrote an article about children's rights in family situations -- particularly those that pose a threat to their health and safety. As recently as a few years ago, some critics suggested that by supporting a child's right to a loving family, I favored giving government more power to break up biological families and giving children the right to bring trivial disputes with their parents -- like curfews or who takes out the garbage -- to court.

Thankfully, those erroneous interpretations have given way to a clearer consensus about which children should be placed back with their biological parents -- and which should not.

We are beginning to recognize that some parents simply are not capable of taking care of their own children -- and likely never will be. Think about Elisa Izquierdo, the four-year-old girl in New York City who was found starved to death in her family's home last year; or five-year-old Richard Holmes who was discovered earlier this year to have been tortured and abused in his own home in a Maryland suburb.

Clearly, these children and others like them would be better off growing up with the love and support of an adoptive family than with biological parents who put them in harm's way.

At the same time, we have to recognize that some parents who have had problems with their children can learn to be responsible but need help in coping with the stresses of parenthood and child-rearing. In these cases we must make sure that parents have the support and counseling they need.

Today, the House and Senate are considering bills that would bring more order, logic and compassion to the process.

Under both bills, "reasonable efforts" to return a child to his or her family would not be required in extreme cases such as torture, abandonment, physical or sexual abuse. Court hearings to determine the permanent placement of a child would be required within 12 months of his or her arrival in the foster care system, instead of the current 18 months. The hearings would be called "permanency planning hearings" to make clear the goal of the proceedings.

There are also provisions in the legislation to provide financial incentives to states to increase the number of adoptions from the public child welfare system -- and particularly to increase the number of adoptions of special needs children.

These are important steps toward ensuring that children no longer languish indefinitely in foster care. They are particularly critical for children who are traditionally hard to place: those with disabilities, who are medically frail, have siblings, or are minorities. As we embark on a national discussion about race relations, which the President called for earlier this month, let us take special note that a disproportionate number of children in foster care are African-American. These children can bring boundless joy to families, and families can bring boundless joy to them. But we have to work harder to ensure that these unions happen.

Let me be clear: The President is committed to working with Congress to achieve the goals you and the Administration share and to find the funding necessary to achieve the strongest adoption bill possible.

Many provisions in the House and Senate bills incorporate recommendations made in *Adoption 2002*, a report prepared by the Department of Health and Human Services in response to the President's directive to identify barriers to adoption and double the number of children placed annually in permanent homes by the year 2002.

Giving states flexibility to shorten the adoption process, highlighting strategies that are working, and providing incentives to meet adoption goals -- all part of the President's action plan -- build on other Administration efforts.

To break down financial, cultural and social barriers to adoption, the Administration has made it illegal to deny or delay an adoption on the basis of race. And the President has signed into law a \$5,000 tax credit for families who adopt, with an increase to \$6,000 for families who adopt children with special needs.

The President's chief concern has been -- and continues to be -- that no child is deprived of a safe and permanent home for one day longer than necessary. As he has said, he wants every state, every family court, every case worker in the country to understand that children's health and safety must be paramount in resolving these cases.

He is determined to work across party lines, at every level of government and with every sector of society, to give every child in America the security of a loving, nurturing and permanent home.

Yet while we all know that federal leadership is crucial, we also know that it is not enough to bring about the sweeping change our child welfare system requires.

That's where you come in.

I want to commend the Kellogg Foundation for bringing together policy makers, business and religious leaders, elected officials, judges, child advocates, and foster and adoptive families here to discuss strategies to reduce the number of children waiting to be adopted and to speed up the adoption process so that no child lingers in foster care for more than one year.

I also want to commend you for launching the *Families for Kids* initiative, which has already produced tangible results in eleven sites around the country, including:

- providing counseling for adoptive parents
- modernizing computer data
- bringing together churches to find permanent homes for foster children -- particularly special needs children
- making changes in the judicial system to address the needs of children in foster care.

As a result of these and other efforts undertaken as part of *Families for Kids*, 7,000 children were placed in permanent families last year. Many promising new partnerships are underway. And there are important lessons that can be replicated in every community and state cross our country.

Today, we understand even more about the urgency of this mission. As the White House Conference on Early Childhood Development and Learning in April made clear, children need love, nurturing, stimulation and security from the moment they enter this world. Depriving them of consistency and permanence is depriving them of the chance to achieve their God-given potential.

At the same time, we must not overlook the critical difference that loving parents can make in the lives of older children as well. Children of all ages can benefit from the care and attention of a stable, loving family. And that's why your efforts are so crucial to bringing the best out in all of America's children, whether they are infants or adolescents.

I hope you will continue to lead our nation as we continue this important work. As Americans, we live in the most prosperous country in the world. Our economy is flourishing. We are known the world over for our compassion and generous spirit.

So let's meet this test and show that we really do stand for children. Let's give every child the gift of love that he or she deserves.

Thank you.

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**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR ADOPTION DINNER
WASHINGTON, D.C.
APRIL 16, 1997**

Talking Points

- Thank you very much, Lou (Davidson). I want to thank the National Council for Adoption for this very kind "Bully Pulpit" award. But most of all I want to thank you -- the members of the council -- for your consistent, energetic and strong leadership on behalf of adoptive families and the thousands of children in our country and around the world who urgently need safe, loving and permanent homes.
- Let me also congratulate tonight's honorees for their commitment to encouraging and facilitating adoption in our country. Every child deserves the chance to grow up with the love of a permanent family and we should never let anything get in the way of efforts to make sure it happens. I thank you for working together on this issue.
- As a long-time advocate for adoption, I've found much hope in the recent efforts on the part of so many, including most of you in this audience, to reform our foster care and strengthen our adoption systems. The President has worked with members of Congress on both sides of the aisle to make it illegal to deny or delay an adoption simply because the adoptive parents and children were not of the same race. And he's very proud of the new \$5,000 tax credit that will help families defray the costs of adoption.
- As you know, this winter, the President asked Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala to find effective ways to move children more rapidly from foster care to permanent homes, and to meet a national goal of doubling the number of children placed annually in permanent homes by the year 2002. The Adoption 2002 report is the result of that research. It is based on extensive interviews, surveys, and consultations with placement agencies, adoption and child welfare advocates, and social workers nationwide. And I am particularly pleased that careful attention was paid to the thoughts and observations of adoptive and foster parents because they know better than anyone the strengths and shortcomings of our system.
- As I travel around the country, I've met many grassroots adoption activists who've told me what a very real difference all of these efforts have made in their communities.
- And I assure you that the Administration will continue to work to ensure that no child ever has to grow up in our foster care system. We will make sure that steps to secure permanent, safe, and loving homes for children -- whether they are with their biological families or others -- begin as soon as a child enters foster care, not after 4 days or 5 months or 6 years of shuttling from placement to placement. And we will work with

partners from all across the community -- businesses, foundations, the media -- to raise public awareness and to encourage more families to experience the joys of adoption.

- Tomorrow, the President and I will host a Conference on Early Childhood Development and Learning. As science is telling us, the first three years of life are crucial to a child's intellectual, neurological and emotional development. Children who have adults to talk to them, to read to them, and to make them feel secure and loved throughout their earliest years will thrive. Those growing up without these influences are less likely to live up to their God-given potentials. That is why our task is so urgent, why we need to find permanent homes for our children as soon as we can.
- But at the same time, let us remember that it is never too late for a child to join an adoptive family. As many of you can attest, adoption at any stage of a child's life can truly be life-changing -- and life-saving.
- So let us continue to work together to bring the love of permanent families to all our children.

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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

February 14, 1997

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AND THE FIRST LADY
AT PRESENTATION OF ADOPTION 2002 REPORT

The Oval Office

12:51 P.M. EST

MRS. CLINTON: I want to welcome all of you to the White House and wish you a happy Valentine's Day. I am delighted that we are holding this event on a day when we think about all kinds of love, and we are gathered to announce a plan that we hope can bring the love of a permanent family to the hundreds of thousands of children waiting in our foster care system.

Two months ago the President directed Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala to investigate the barriers that keep so many of our children in the limbo of foster care. He asked the Secretary to report to him with specific recommendations on how best to move children more rapidly from foster care to permanent homes, and how to meet a national goal of doubling the number of children placed annually in permanent homes by the year 2002.

In a few minutes, Olivia Golden, Acting Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services, will present her department's findings to the President. I'm very impressed by the hard work that went into this report. It is based on extensive interviews, surveys and consultations with placement agencies, adoption and child welfare advocates, and social workers nationwide. I'm particularly pleased that careful attention was paid to the thoughts and observations of adoptive and foster parents because they know better than anyone the strengths and shortcomings of our system.

This report makes it very clear that foster care should never be a permanent solution. No child should grow up in foster care. Children deserve prompt, efficient decision-making from the adults who serve them. They deserve schedules for permanent placement that respect their developmental needs. And they deserve federal leadership to make that happen.

Ensuring the safety and timely placement of a child with a permanent loving family should be the mission of our foster care system. But for too many years this mission has been obscured as too many children have literally grown up or spent the majority of their childhoods in the system. They have led transient lives, moving from one foster family to the next, experiencing few constants but growing case files and dreams for permanent families. We can no longer afford these delays.

In recent years we have learned much about the tremendous influence that adults caring for children in their earliest years can have on their intellectual, neurological, and emotional development. Children who have adults to talk to them, read to them, make them feel secure and loved throughout their earliest years will thrive. And we cannot afford to let any child who could be in such a loving situation go without it.

That is why steps to secure permanent, safe, and loving homes for children, whether they are with their biological families

or others, should begin as soon as a child enters the foster care system, not after four days or five months or six years of shuttling from placement to placement.

We have already witnessed important steps to remedy the situation. Two years ago, the President and Congress made it illegal to deny or delay an adoption simply because the adoptive parents and children were not of the same race. Last year, the administration and Congress strengthened that legislation. The President also signed a \$5,000 tax credit for families who adopt. And families who adopt children with special needs can receive \$6,000.

Decorating the Oval Office today are valentines created by some of the 600 children waiting in Iowa in foster care. Each valentine, sponsored by the Iowa Citizens Foster Care Review Board, tells the story of a child waiting to be adopted. The paper hearts list the age the child came into the foster care system, the age the child became free for adoption, and the number of days they have been waiting for a family.

Every year these valentines are placed on trees at the Iowa State Capitol. This Valentine's Day, the children decided to send their valentines to the White House, as well. Some of them sent letters to accompany their valentines -- letters such as this one: "Dear President, my name is Rollie. I am 12. I live in Iowa. I like to play football and basketball. I've been waiting eight years for an adoptive family. I'm hoping for a family with pets, a brother and a sister, and nice parents."

Let's all work together so that Rollie and thousands of other children waiting in foster care can see their dreams come true.

Now, it is my great pleasure to introduce the acting Assistant Secretary of Health and Human Services, Olivia Golden, who will tell us more about today's report.

ASSISTANT SECRETARY GOLDEN: Mrs. Clinton, thank you for that introduction and for your leadership. And thank you, Mr. President, for giving us the opportunity to be here today. Secretary Shalala wished she could be here, and it's an honor for me to be here in her place.

Mr. President, in December you told us that you wanted

to double the number of children who are adopted or permanently placed from foster care by the year 2002. You wanted to move children more rapidly from foster care to permanent homes, and you told us to come back in 60 days with a plan for how to do it. Let me tell you what we've done.

To prepare our report to you we consulted with leaders in Congress, in state and local governments, child welfare experts, community leaders and foster and adoptive parents. Hundreds of people talked with us; 200 sent us letters. It was an enormously exciting process, because what we heard was a sense of joy and excitement from all over the country that under the leadership of the President and the First Lady the nation was ready to join together to address this issue. And we learned a tremendous amount from this process. What we learned from this consultation will guide our work on this initiative and on all of our work with children in the child welfare system.

So again, I want to thank you, Mr. President, for the opportunity to do this work.

The report, Adoption 2002, that I have the honor to present today is an action plan to make sure that all of the 450,000 children in foster care have a real chance for a loving, permanent home, and that we're able to meet the President's goal of doubling by the year 2002 the number of children adopted or placed in permanent homes.

Let me give you just a few highlights of the report. The report begins with the 10 principles that we learned from our consultations and that will guide our work. The first, as the First Lady said, is that every child deserves a safe, permanent family. The report commits us to setting goals with every state to double adoptions by the year 2002. And for the first time that we know of in federal child welfare spending, we've put dollars behind results, paying for performance to make sure that states receive incentives if they in fact move ahead on adoption.

The report proposes several major changes in federal legislation to help more children find permanent homes and remove procedural barriers. And it proposes targeted funding for states to help them dismantle procedural and other barriers to permanency. And it proposes activities to break down racial and ethnic barriers to adoption. And finally, the report proposes a comprehensive technical assistance plan to bring the best talent in the nation to help the

courts, state child welfare agencies, community leaders to work together to ensure that children move promptly to a loving permanent home.

What we believe makes this exciting agenda possible is the excitement we've heard from community leaders across the country the partnership and commitment we've received from state and local leaders -- we have support from seven governors for our goals described in the report and we expect many more.

What makes it possible is bipartisan congressional commitment; and, most of all, what makes it possible is the leadership that we've experienced and the nation has experienced from the President and the First Lady. So it's a tremendous honor to be able today to present to you Adoption 2002.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. (Applause.)

Thank you very much, Olivia. Ladies and gentlemen and boys and girls, thank you all for being here. I also want to say a special word of thanks to some members of Congress who are not here today but who have done an enormous amount of work on this issue, including Senators Rockefeller, Chafee and DeWine, and Congresswoman Kennelly and Congressman Camp.

Let me begin by also saying happy Valentine's Day. All the kids look wonderful. The rest of us look all right, too -- (laughter) -- but the kids look especially wonderful.

I want to thank you, Olivia, for the work you've done. And I want to thank the First Lady for the work she has done on this issue over more than 20 years now. I'll never forget the first conversation we had, shortly we were married, about a case that she had involving a child in foster care who wanted to become an adopted child. I didn't know very much about it before then, and ever since then this issue has been of consuming interest to me because of what I learned through her. And I thank her for that.

We know that our children's fundamental well-being depends upon safety and stability; that without these, children have a very hard time in this complicated, challenging world of ours. We know that far too many of our own children are indeed now in danger in the homes in which they live. The public child welfare system was created to provide a temporary haven for those children, but not to let them languish forever in foster care.

As you heard Olivia say, we have nearly half a million of our children in foster care today. Nearly 100,000 will never return to their original homes. Many of those children still will never know what it's like to live in a real home until they grow up and start their own families. But it does not have to be that way. We can find adoptive and other permanent families for waiting children like these fine children who have joined us today and the children whose valentines you see hanging behind me and here in front.

In December I asked the Department of Health and Human Services to come up with an aggressive legislative and administrative strategy to double the number of children we move from foster care to permanent homes annually by the year 2002, and to move them there much more quickly. I'm proud to say that the Department went to work to produce this blueprint for achieving our goal.

Now we have to move quickly to put this plan into action, so that no child is deprived of a safe and permanent home for even one day longer than necessary. Every agency of every state, every family court, every case worker in the country must understand that children's health and safety are the paramount concerns of the child welfare system, especially when determining whether to remove a child from his or her home, or return them there.

We'll work with Congress to make sure the law explicitly reflects this priority. We'll issue guidelines to the states so there will be no question as to the law's meaning.

Second, to meet the goal of moving 54,000 children into permanent homes in 2002, we'll work with states and set yearly targets. We'll give them, as my balanced budget does, \$10 million a year for the next three years to give them the assistance they need to state agencies, courts and communities to devise such a system. We'll also have \$10 million to establish competitive grants for states to develop model strategies for moving children from foster care to permanent families.

Third, we'll propose legislation to give states bonuses, as Olivia said, for every child that is adopted over the prior year's total, with even larger bonuses when the child has special needs. The balanced budget will start paying for these bonuses, but we know they'll pay for themselves, since foster care costs far more than adoption. This isn't just cost effective -- of course, it's the

right thing to do.

Fourth, to achieve our goal of moving children more quickly, we'll work with Congress to shorten from 18 to 12 months the time a child waits for the first hearing. And we're going to call it a permanency planning hearing, so that there's no mistake as to its purpose.

Fifth, to give credit for model strategies that are working, we'll give national awards for excellence every year in November, National Adoption Month.

Finally, we'll redouble our efforts to make sure no child of one race is deprived of a loving home when a family of another race is prepared to give it. That is illegal and wrong and often hurts our very neediest children. The Department of Health and Human Services will continue to ensure that states are meeting their obligations under this law.

Putting this plan into action today will mean that we are ensuring that no child will languish in foster care when loving families are out there ready, willing and able to open their hearts and their homes. This is just one part of our strategy to guarantee the well-being of our most vulnerable children. By giving states the flexibility to develop their own strategies, we're moving closer to achieving that goal.

I'm proud to announce that we have approved Ohio's request for a waiver in dealing with their child welfare system. This is the fifth of its kind, and there will be more to come. It gives Ohio the authority to design and to test a managed care approach to improve child welfare services and move children out of foster care more quickly.

By working together across party lines at every level of government, in businesses, religious groups, communities, and in our homes, we can make sure that every child in America grows up in a safe and nurturing home. That is a goal every American should be proud to support. That is a gift of love we can make to all of our children. And if you look at the children here today, it's hard to think of anything more important we could be doing to say, Happy Valentine's Day.

Thank you. (Applause.)