



Fostering Hope

A powerful voice in politics works to reform America's foster care system

Each year more than 424,000 children and young adults end up in foster homes; nearly 30 percent of them are African-American. ESSENCE spoke with the Black woman on Capitol Hill whose voice rings loudest for those she says are the most silenced. Rep. Karen Bass (D-CA), founder and chair of the newly created Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth, discusses the latest legislation aimed at empowering foster youth and what it takes to reform the nation's child welfare system.

ESSENCE: What are the challenges facing youngsters in foster care today?
REP. KAREN BASS: The number one problem foster youth face is a lack of stability. They know that at any

moment a social worker can yank them out of their foster home or school. Foster youth don't get to be normal, outrageous teenagers. When a foster youth misbehaves, especially an African-American male, the foster

parent can call the social worker and say, "I'm sick of this kid. Take him." Because of this, these youngsters lack secure connections to adults, and without a stable home and parent, other issues arise, usually with their education and health. Some switch schools multiple times, while others run away, become homeless and abuse substances. And a new phenomenon is that older men—and tragically even some foster boys—lure foster girls into sex work, mostly starting at age 12.

ESSENCE: Why does the foster care system seem broken? And what can be done to improve it?

BASS: Most states and counties have serious restrictions on federal financing for foster youth. The system normally requires social workers to remove a child from the biological parents before the foster care system can provide that child with money or resources. A better solution would be to use the money to help that child's family and, if possible, not put the child in the system at all. States and

counties need to adopt more flexible policies for federal financing so social workers can determine how to use money for children based on their needs, rather than applying restrictive, mechanical formulas.

ESSENCE: Last year the Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth submitted the Uninterrupted Scholars Act, which was approved by the Senate and the House and signed by President Obama. What is the importance of the act?

BASS: It grants social workers access to foster youth's school and immunization records. Foster youth switch schools on average three to five times in the course of their school career. Having their records on hand will prevent these children from repeating the same grade or immunizations at a new school. The Caucus will continue to work with school boards and community organizations and use social media to let foster youth know the law has changed. We want to make sure the legislation is actually implemented.

—Lyndra Vassar

A SURVIVOR'S STORY

DANIESHA TOBEY-RICHARDS, 19, ON LIFE IN FOSTER CARE

I recently traveled with Rep. Bass to Washington, D.C., to speak to Congress on behalf of foster youth. As the daughters of a single mother who struggled with alcoholism, my sister and I found ourselves in the hands of the state. I was removed from my family after my stepfather overdosed on heroin, and I grappled with constant loneliness. I believe my experiences prepared me to shed light on what foster children go through. I only switched foster homes twice, but my sister landed in 15 homes before we were reunited. If I could I would have bottled the empowerment I felt during those four days in D.C. and mailed it to every foster child in America, because that's what we need. I was one of the lucky ones—I graduated from high school and am currently studying psychology at the University of Massachusetts—Dartmouth to research and advocate for foster youth. My hope is that the stigma of foster youth as delinquents will vanish and that educators, parents and policymakers will support us like any other child, because we are children, too. —As told to L.V.

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