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US Senate

Topic B: "The challenge of finding homes for teenagers in the foster care system in the USA."

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I. COMMITTEE BACKGROUND

The United States Senate is the legislative branch of the US government, composed of both senators and representatives from each state. Its primary function is to create and approve laws, which undergo the legislative process which is taken at the end by vote. Within its responsibilities lies the approving of federal justices and judges, as well as passing the national budget and even the declaration of war.

Each state has the power of having 2 senators, and the number of representatives is dependent on the population of each state. The Vice President as the President of the Senate, and has in his hands the decisive vote in case of a tie. In order to pass legislation, both the House and the Senate must pass the same bill through a majority of vote. Additionally, the Senate plays the essential role of handling impeachment cases.

II. HISTORY OF THE TOPIC

It was a common practice in English Poor Law, that children were boarded with "worthy widows" who were paid by collections from the congregation, which developed itself into our contemporary concept of the foster care system.

These laws were imported to the US and that was the beginning of placing children into homes. Even though this system permitted abuse and exploitation in the homes, it was a step forward from almshouses of the time where children were exposed to horrendous conditions and even more abusive adults.

As a result of this historical context, sectarian social agencies and state governments became involved and interested in foster home placements.

During the early 1900's, social agencies began to supervise foster parents, and keep track record of everything involving children in the system. Services were provided to natural families to enable the child to return home and foster parents were now seen as part of a professional team working to find permanency for dependent children.

B. Evolution of the topic

Currently, there's a plethora of issues, mostly major and life affecting, within the foster care and child welfare systems, from the foster-care-to-prison-pipeline to the lack of preventative services that can be helpful to families before they reach a crisis point. Statistics show that children who age out of foster care at the ages of 18 or 21 are more likely than the average teen to these outcomes: high rates of PTSD, unplanned pregnancy, unemployment and homelessness.

The United States spends \$30 billion on foster care annually, yet most children return home with scarce evidence that they or their

families' trajectories are improved by the costly and often traumatic intervention.

For families, becoming involved with the child welfare system is both traumatic and distressingly common. More than one in three children experience an abuse or neglect investigation before reaching adulthood, and that number is one in two for Black children. Moreover, one in nine Black children and one in seven Native American children spend part of their childhood in foster care. Such disparities reflect the structural racism embedded within American systems; child welfare is no different.

In the state of Texas, the foster care system has been under constant backlash and intense scrutiny in recent years. In 2015, federal District Court Judge Janis Jack ruled that Texas "has violated the constitutional rights of foster children by exposing them to an unreasonable risk of harm in a system where children often age out of care more damaged than when they entered." Again, in June of 2020, two court-appointed monitors released a 363-page report which detailed "substantial threats to children's safety," particularly in large, privately-run foster homes.

This led to Judge Jack finding state officials in contempt of court in September of 2020 for not making enough progress on her orders, which include timely investigations of abuse and neglect in foster homes, increased oversight of residential facilities that house children, and improved communication between state agencies.

In 2021, many of these issues still remain, and have been compounded by a foster care placement crisis in the state, which has only grown worse with the COVID-19 pandemic.

C. Living in the Foster Care System

Children in foster care are constantly facing bounds of trauma and tremendous hardships. The simple act of leaving home is a traumatic experience, but this is just the beginning for children

entering the welfare system. Many have been removed from their home due to abuse or neglect. Many are forced to adapt to constantly changing environments, as they are bounced from home to home. Some are returned to their biological family after a short-term placement, only to be reentered back into the system.

Living a major part of your life in the system is challenging, in any situation, and the whole experience can have big negative effects on a child's mental and emotional health.

In most cases in the system, children are removed from their homes because of abuse, neglect, or maltreatment, from a parent or caregiver, which denotes that it is highly likely that these children come with their own set of emotional baggage from the time before the system.

Even though the goal of the foster care system is to give disenfranchised children a safe and welcoming home until they're able to go back home, or given a permanent placement, the reality is that at least 20,000 children in the system every year age out of foster care before this even becomes a possibility for them.

To fully support children going through such hardships, we first need to understand what they go through on a daily basis, the risks they face, and what possible solutions can be presented to prevent negative and traumatic experiences from happening.

In foster care, children are constantly in the move, and have to interact with multiple people with completely different temperaments on their journey. This comes with severe instability, and with that, comes loss. Loss comes as an important part of the foster system, with the separation of the child from their first family, which later in life affects the child's ability to form and maintain healthy relationships.

Without proper support and treatment, children going through this will have a hard time going into adulthood, struggling with constant mental turmoil and anguish. Not only do these children

need proper mental health care, but they need ongoing support from their guardians, social workers, and state agencies.

D. Teens in the Foster Care system

The sad reality is that many teens in foster care don't have an easy time becoming adults and many struggle with basic life skills. Since the number of yearly "age out" adults in the system is 20,000, there are multiple more adults without the proper skills to go through life. The phrase "age out" is a term to describe youth who turn eighteen before finding a permanent home. This is a callous term to describe a child being without a forever family forced to face the world alone.

This is a major issue for society as a whole, since the youth represents the society the country shall have in the future, and current statistics show that teens who age out of the system have the odds stacked against them.

National studies have shown that within two to four years of leaving foster care at age 18:

- 40% were homeless
- 40% were receiving public assistance or were incarcerated
- 40% experienced drug or alcohol abuse
- 46% had not finished high school
- 51% were unemployed
- 84% became parents

These statistics come from a lack of education and support from the society they're a part of, and it's in the whole country's business that these numbers are changed, for the better.

III. CURRENT ISSUES

A. Points of view of the political parties

As it is well known, the USA is ruled by two main political parties, which both have widely different points of view on many issues, but not so different in the issues regarding the foster care system.

The crisis in child care has become a rare issue of bipartisan agreement. Democrats are trying to revive their plan to subsidize child care for most families, and now Senate Republicans have introduced their own bill on the issue.

Yet, the most surprising thing about these two bills by the two political parties is the amount of overlap between them, allowing for collaboration between the parties, instead of divide, for once. There is a joint recognition that child care needs to be more accessible and affordable and that its quality, along with workers' pay, needs to increase. But the bills differ drastically on how much to spend, how to finance it and which legislative vehicle to use.

On the Republican side, the bill by Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina and Senator Richard Burr of North Carolina, would use an existing program, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, to increase the money sent to states to help low-income families pay for child care. This would grow the eligibility for receiving aid. Nowadays, families earning up to 85% of their state's median are eligible, but with the new plan, this would change. In the new plan, families would qualify if they earned up to 1.5 times the state median income — around \$142,000 nationwide — and their payments would be capped at 7 percent of their family income. Those earning up to 75 percent of the median income — around \$71,000, depending on the state — would pay nothing.

The Democrats' plan would cover much more ground, providing child care assistance to nine in 10 families. As with the Republican plan, the lowest earners would pay nothing. But the 7 percent cap on

child care spending would apply to more families — those earning up to 2.5 times their state’s median income, about \$237,000 nationally. It calls for the government to guarantee to spend \$382 billion over six years on care and education for children 0 to 5, raised from increased taxes on corporations and the rich.

I. CONCLUSION

The issue of teens in the foster care system in the United States needs to be tackled with the utmost care and consideration for all of the parties involved, those being the government and the legal citizens. The negative effects of this issue are quite clear, since it affects the country’s future generations, and therefore, the future of the nation. Both political parties must come to an agreement regarding this topic, because if the problem is left untreated, it shall grow to something uncontrollable. Something to take into consideration is that whatever decision the Senate comes to will affect the lives of millions all over the US, and all over the world.

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