

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 13, 2004

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**Connecticut Children Adrift in Foster Care Could Find Safety,
Permanence with Grandparents and Others,
New Report Shows**

***Better Federal Support and More Flexible State Rules Would Open
Opportunities for Children in State***

New Haven, CT -- According to a new report released today by the national, nonpartisan *Fostering Results*, children adrift in foster care can find safety, permanence, and security with grandparents and other relative caregivers as an alternative to remaining in foster care. In Connecticut, which adopted a wholly state-funded subsidized guardianship program in 1997, federal funding support for relatives who assume guardianship of children in DCF custody and modification of eligibility requirements could expand the use of this important permanency planning option, according to CT Voices for Children, a research-based advocacy organization. Expansion of federal funding support to Connecticut's subsidized guardianship program also could bring more than \$550,000 of additional federal funds to Connecticut.

The report, titled "Family Ties," uses recently-released 2002 federal data to estimate that 19,250 children in long-term relative foster care in the United States are in "permanency limbo" – where a court has determined that they cannot be safely returned to their parents and adoption also is not an option. The report found that when states used federal funds (such as through "waivers" of federal funding rules) to help subsidize guardianships, many such children left foster care. Specifically, the report found that between 2000 and 2001, 9,636 foster children left foster care for permanent homes with legal guardians (including grandparents) through subsidized guardianships.

"Our research shows that foster children are safer and more secure when placed with relatives than in foster homes unknown to them," said Mark Testa, the report's author. Testa is Co-Director of *Fostering Results* and Director of the Children & Family Research Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "This study convincingly reveals that states could move more children out of long-term, foster care and into safe and permanent homes if the federal government supported legal guardianship by grandparents and other relatives."

The report notes that the Pew Commission on Foster Care and other experts have recommended that states be given the option to receive federal assistance to support children leaving foster care to live with legal guardians, rather than having to continue to seek waivers for an idea that has been proven to work. In Connecticut, which has a wholly state-funded subsidized guardianship program, allowing federal reimbursement for costs could help additional Connecticut children who are stuck in long term foster care achieve safety, permanence and security more quickly. Federal funding support also would free state funds for other essential child welfare purposes.

Subsidized Guardianship in Connecticut Today

Connecticut recognizes the benefits of subsidized guardianships with relatives as a permanency planning option. It provides stability, continuity, and familiarity that is hard to match in foster homes with persons who are strangers to the child. In 1997, Connecticut established a state-funded subsidized guardianship program to:

- ❖ Provide a permanent plan for children in the custody of the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) who have been placed with relative caregivers (because a parent has died or is unable to provide care) and thereby improve children's outcomes.
- ❖ Provide relative caregivers comparable levels of financial support as they would receive if the children remained on DCF's caseload or were placed in subsidized adoptions.
- ❖ Reduce the number of children on DCF's caseload, saving the significant costs of staffing cases where continued oversight is not necessary and relatives are ready, willing, and able to assume care.

Connecticut's subsidized guardianship program:

- ❖ Provides a monthly subsidy that is generally equal to DCF's current foster care rate for a child of similar age and special needs.
- ❖ Continues medical benefits that were provided to the child while on DCF's caseload, unless the child becomes eligible for private health insurance through the relative guardian's health care policy.
- ❖ Provides a one-time, exceptional expense subsidy for expenses the relative incurs in assuming guardianship (e.g. psychological or physical examinations).

To be eligible for a subsidized guardianship in Connecticut, children must have been in foster care for at least 18 months and have been living with the relative requesting the subsidy for at least 12 months (although the 18 and 12 months do not need to be consecutive). If adoption of the child by the relative caregiver is an option, DCF must counsel the relative on the advantages and disadvantages of adoption and subsidized guardianship. Children remain eligible for Connecticut's subsidized guardianship program until they reach 18 years of age, or 21 years of age if the child is in full-time attendance at a secondary school, technical school or college, or is a state accredited job training program.

The Limits Of A Wholly State-Funded Program

Because Connecticut's subsidized guardianship program is entirely state-funded, it is more vulnerable to budget cuts than Connecticut's foster care and subsidized adoption programs. Without federal reimbursement, it is also more expensive for Connecticut to expand this program should it choose to do so. By contrast, 50% federal matching funds currently are provided through Title IV-E of the Social Security Act for foster care and subsidized adoptions when children are from low-income families.

To make permanent legal guardianships available to more children who are now in Connecticut's foster care system, Connecticut Voices for Children, a research based child advocacy organization, has called for

- **Federal matching funds for subsidized guardianships.** The federal government should be a 50% funding partner with Connecticut when relatives assume guardianship of children on DCF's caseload, as it is when children are in foster care or in subsidized adoptions. An analysis by Rob Geen of The Urban Institute estimates that if Title IV-E matching funds were available for Connecticut's subsidized guardianship program, nearly 400 children would benefit in 2005 (291 who had guardianships finalized before 2005 and 95 who had guardianships finalized in 2005 or after) and Connecticut would be able to claim \$552,000 in federal reimbursements. By 2009, about 720 children would be in subsidized guardianships and Connecticut would receive \$732,000 in federal reimbursements for the subsidies provided to relative guardians.
- **Reduced state waiting periods for grandparents and other relative caregivers who want to become permanent legal guardians and receive financial help.** Under Connecticut's current subsidized guardianship rules, children must have been in DCF custody for at least 18 months and have been living with the relative requesting the subsidy for at least 12 months to claim the subsidy (although the months do not have to be consecutive). Voices recommends amending state law to provide DCF with greater discretion to waive time limits when it is evident that subsidized guardianship is the best permanency option. This change would help children find permanent homes more quickly and cut DCF's staffing and administrative costs.

“Maintaining family ties is particularly important for children who enter foster care because of parental abuse or neglect. Yet many relative caregivers lack the financial means to assume care on an on-going basis,” comments Shelley Geballe, President of Connecticut Voices for Children. “Through subsidized guardianships, Connecticut can support these relative caregivers, getting better results for children, and at a lower cost. The federal government should be a funding partner in this – just as it is in foster care and adoption.”

According to Jeanne Milstein, Connecticut's Child Advocate, “Subsidized guardianships offer an important alternative to foster care for children who can't return to their parents and who also can't be adopted or who don't wish to be adopted. Connecticut would benefit greatly if the federal government helped pay for Connecticut's subsidized guardianship program. It will go far to keep families together and free up state funds for other essential child welfare purposes.”

ABOUT FOSTERING RESULTS

Fostering Results is a national, nonpartisan project to raise awareness of issues facing children in foster care. It is supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts to the Children and Family Research Center at the School of Social Work, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The complete report is available at www.fosteringresults.org.

ABOUT CONNECTICUT VOICES FOR CHILDREN

Connecticut Voices for Children is a research-based policy and advocacy organization committed to promoting leadership, policy change, and investment on behalf of all of Connecticut's children and youth (www.ctkidslink.org). Connecticut Voices is a state partner of *Fostering Results* and has worked for years on ways to improve child welfare services, including efforts to address state and federal financing challenges.

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