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DAVIS: Advancing kinship care

Danny K. Davis

Op-Ed:

According to Census data, there are just under 120,000 children in Illinois being raised by their grandparents or other relatives. Kinship care is especially significant for Chicago. My Congressional District, the 7th, has the highest percentage of children living with kinship caregivers in the nation, followed by the 1st District of Illinois with the second-highest percentage and the 2nd District of Illinois with the 10th highest percentage in the nation.

Last week, the House passed H.R. 6307, the Fostering Connections to Success Act, sponsored by Rep. Jim McDermott, Washington Democrat, and Rep. Jerry Weller, Illinois Republican. This bill is a strong first step in reforming the foster care system, and it includes provisions supporting kinship caregivers that I have championed for years. The bill includes the three core elements of my bill, H.R. 2188, the Kinship Caregiver Support Act, which I introduced with Rep. Tim Johnson Illinois Republican: 1) it allows states to use federal funds to support family caregivers raising relatives in the foster care system; 2) it provides funding to establish kinship navigator programs; and 3) it requires notification of relatives when a child enters the foster care system.

Research clearly shows that kinship foster care families are safer, more stable placements that are more likely to keep children connected with their siblings and communities than non-relative placements. These placements are cost effective. In Illinois, studies projected a savings of approximately \$48 million over ten years. Federal financial assistance currently is available to foster and adoptive families. Only a few states receive a waiver to provide such aid to kinship caregivers. Illinois enjoys such a waiver, which currently serves over 6,000 children statewide. H.R. 6307 removes this roadblock for all the states and offers an important path to permanency, especially for African American children. The bill also facilitates kinship care foster placements by requiring states to notify grandparents and other adult relatives when a child is removed from custody of a parent.

The Fostering Connections to Success Act funds innovative programs such as kinship navigator programs to assist relative providers within and outside the foster care system to obtain appropriate services. These services support relative caregivers who proactively kept their young relatives out of the foster care system. I have spoken to too many grandmothers who thought they were helping their grandchildren by asking the courts for custody to keep their children out of the system, only to learn that this preventive step disqualified them from any support via subsidized guardianship.

We still have more to do. For example, we need to give States the flexibility to develop different licensing standards for kinship caregivers. We also must encourage states to promote all types of permanency: adoption, guardianship, and reunification. However, the Fostering Connections to Success Act represents a significant step forward. I am proud to be a part of the Congress that is moving this important piece of legislation. I hope that our colleagues in the Senate and the president will do their part to advance this legislation into law.

Rep. Danny K. Davis is an Illinois Democrat.