



**Testimony Re: House Bill 7707 An Act Relating to Human Services --
Abused And Neglected Children**

House Judiciary Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for House Bill 7707 and thank Representative Williams for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Vella-Wilkinson, Giraldo, Morales, and Felix for co-sponsoring it. This bill would require the Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) and the Family Court to initially consider the placement of a child under their care with the child's immediate family members or next of kin before placement in foster care. Or in the event that immediate family care is not appropriate, placement with a family of the child's ethnic, cultural or racial heritage shall receive preference.

For children removed from their parents because of neglect or abuse, placement with kinship caregivers, such as a family member or close family friend, is often the best option and can minimize the trauma of removal. Appropriate kinship placements can provide continuity, safety, family connection and maintain connections between the child, their community and school.

The federal *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* of 2008 requires that child welfare agencies notify all adult relatives within 30 days of a child's removal in an effort to increase opportunities for children to be placed with family members. Children in kinship foster families have been shown to have fewer mental health and behavioral issues, as well as increased educational and placement stability.

DCYF has made progress in prioritizing kinship placement. As of March 1, 2022, of all children in out-of-home placements, 82% are in foster families, and of all children in foster families, 71% are in relative/kinship families. This is an improvement from December 31, 2020 when of all children in out-of-home placements, 70% were in foster families, and of all children in foster families, 56% were in relative/kinship families. Rhode Island defines kin broadly and includes any adult who has a close and caring relationship with the child.

We support House Bill 7707 because we know the benefits of placing children with their immediate family or other close family or friends. Thank you for the leadership that the General Assembly has shown on this issue and for the opportunity to testify today.