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COMMENTARY

Nation's foster children deserve stable families

By Elijah Sanchez

For many people, birthdays mean celebration. Not me: I entered Hawai'i's foster care system at the age of 15, so my "sweet 16th" birthday was neither sweet nor happy. I had been separated from my two siblings and was living with people who didn't care about me. All I got was a pat on the back — no present, no card. I thought to myself, "How many other foster children experience birthdays like this?"

The answer is too many. Each year, more than 500,000 children spend their birthdays in foster care, separated from brothers and sisters, moving from home to home, school to school. I spent four years in foster care and moved five times.

In Hawai'i today, there are nearly 3,000 children in foster care. They spend an average of nearly two years in care and are often separated from brothers and sisters. More than a third (38 percent) of Hawai'i's foster youth are 5 or younger, and research has shown that many of the youngest foster children suffer the most in terms of their physical, emotional and educational well-being.

It is time to fix foster care.

Last week, I joined with current and former foster youth, advocates, policymakers and others for a Washington, D.C., event marking the birthdays of the half-million children in foster care. The event was sponsored by Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now, a project of The Pew Charitable Trusts, as part of its campaign calling for reform of the federal financing system for foster care. A new guide to the U.S. foster care system, "Time for Reform: Too Many Birthdays in Foster Care," was released, and we met with members of Congress.

Wearing T-shirts printed with "Don't turn your back on us," we delivered birthday cakes to each member of the House of Representatives. Each cake came with a birthday card that read: "Happy Birthday to the 513,000 children who will celebrate their birthdays this year in foster care without a permanent, loving family."

I want all foster children to be able to live permanently with a loving family. My foster brother has been in five placements and four high schools, all in one school year. Moving around is eating away at him and the person he used to be. Almost 20 percent of foster youth now wait five or more years for the family that should be their birthright.

If Congress provided more flexible, reliable funds for foster care, this might translate into more support for programs that could keep families together, prevent children from entering foster care, or reduce the time they spend in foster care. My brother has two years left in foster care, but I hope before that happens he can be reunified with his mother, where he belongs.

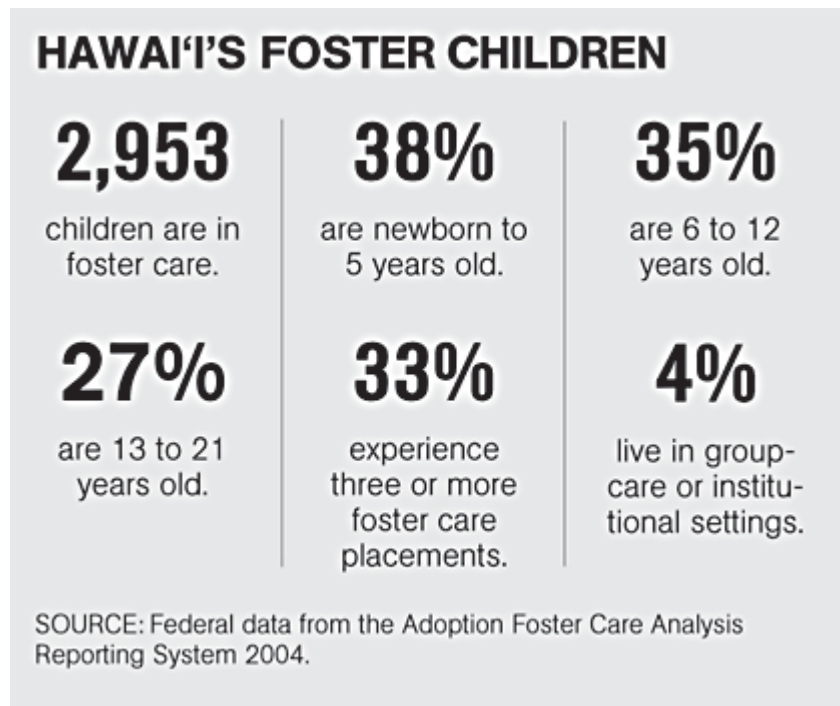
In Hawai'i, reforms are well under way, said Amy Tsark, Child Welfare Services Branch Administrator for the state Department of Human Services, who oversees foster care. "We have actively in the last four years been reforming our child welfare and foster care system. One of those reforms is to keep siblings together in the same foster home, and even if they have been separated we keep them connected through visitations," Tsark said. "If the children are not able to be returned to biological parents we actively look for other family members to provide a permanent and loving home for these children. We are committed to keeping families together, safely."

A major finding of the national, nonpartisan Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care was the inflexibility of the current financing system. Most federal foster care money can only be used to place children in the foster care system, rather than to keep families together, keep children out of foster care, or limit the time they spend in the system. Flexibility in the financing system would create and support permanent, loving families through reunification, adoption and guardianship, according to the commission.

I think of my brother and all of the other children in foster care across the country, and I know that we need to do all that we can to get them out of foster care and join permanent, loving families. They are waiting — we must fix foster care now.

Federal funding reform could restore lives of too many foster kids who feel forgotten

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FOR FOSTER CARE REFORM

Kids Are Waiting: Fix Foster Care Now is a national, nonpartisan campaign dedicated to promoting foster care reform led by The Pew Charitable Trusts, working together with local, state and national partners. For more information, visit www.kidsarewaiting.org.

To learn more about foster care reforms in Hawai'i go to www.dhs.hawaii.gov