



BOB CASEY

FIGHTING *for* PENNSYLVANIA FAMILIES

The Foster Youth Mental Health Act

U.S. Senator Bob Casey

Foster youth and former foster youth disproportionately experience mental health challenges

As many as [80 percent](#) of children in foster care have significant mental health needs, compared to approximately [20 percent](#) of the general population. Consequently, the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) has identified mental health as the most critical unmet health need for children in foster care. [Factors](#) contributing to the high level of need among youth in, and formerly in, foster care include complex trauma, lack of control over their lives, frequently life changes, and challenging family dynamics.

Despite such a high level of need, state systems to provide mental health support for foster youth are highly variable. Advocates have raised alarm about inconsistent access to mental health services, care coordination, and the over-prescription of psychotropic medications when mental health systems lack adequate alternatives for mental health support, including support for general wellness. In addition to meeting the needs of foster youth with a mental health condition, advocates have called for peer support and helping children cope with challenging circumstances regardless of whether they have a diagnosed mental health condition.

The Foster Youth Mental Health Act

Title IV-B, Subpart 1 of the Social Security Act provides grants to states to prevent family separation as well as to promote the safety, permanence and well-being of children in foster care and adoptive families. This bill would amend Title IV-B to:

- **Create a national navigation program to support the mental health and wellbeing of foster youth and former foster youth:** This professionally staffed navigation program would help young people currently or formerly in foster care to navigate and access resources such as mental health support, housing, childcare, and other critical services. Parents and guardians of current and former foster youth would also be able to receive navigation support.
- **Create a set-aside for and expand health planning to ensure states have in place key components of a comprehensive children's mental health system,** including prevention, early intervention, and treatment. This should include: the use of peer specialists; training of caseworkers on connecting young people with therapeutic supports; therapeutic supports and community-based resources that are appropriate for the needs of youth (including meaningful extracurricular activities and wellness support); processes to address privacy concerns; and planning for continuity of care.