A proposed bill known as the Family Prevention Services Act H.R. 5456 is a major concern for Baptist Children’s Homes of North Carolina (BCH) and other child care organizations providing residential services (or congregate care) to boys and girls.

The measure, which is also called the Family First Act, would end the federal funding that statewide Departments of Social Services (DSS) utilize for placing boys and girls in BCH’s care.

“There are no positives and many negatives to the proposed Family First Act,” said BCH president/CEO Michael C. Blackwell. “Any legislation seeking to inhibit children from accessing the exceptional care Baptist Children’s Homes and other residential organizations provide is extremely troubling.”

Boys and girls are referred to BCH through multiple means. Some are placed privately by family members or guardians. Others are referred by DSS who often take custody of children from extreme situations, such as abuse and neglect, and bring them into BCH’s care immediately.

“It’s imperative to remove a child from such heartbreaking circumstances as quickly as possible,” Blackwell said. “Whenever DSS contacts us, day or night, we are able to work together to bring the child in almost instantly. The well being of children is dependent on a strong partnership between DSS and BCH.”

The Family First Act would redirect the funding that empowers DSS to place children in residential child care organizations towards prevention services. The goal is to help children stay out of the foster care system when possible.

BCH chief operating officer Keith Henry, who oversees the day-to-day operations of the nonprofit’s programs and services, sees more cons than pros with the bill’s direction.

“Anything reasonable that can be done to prevent a negative impact on a child is a good thing, and we need to seek those solutions,” Henry explained. “What we cannot do is introduce measures that prevent a child from receiving the type of care that best suits his or her particular needs.”

If the bill passes, DSS choices for children become limited. DSS could still refer boys and girls to BCH, but only for a maximum of two weeks. Long-term placements would no longer be an option. The average length of stay for a child at BCH is nine months. Many stay until they graduate high school and some beyond.

“Every situation is unique, and the specific care one child needs is different than the needs of another,” Henry explained. “DSS must have every option available to them. Legislation that forces them to make decisions based on money instead of a child’s best interest is wrong.”

DSS placements comprise 88% of BCH’s current population. From 2013 to 2015, DSS referrals for BCH’s residential services have increased by 48%.

“With the rise in DSS referrals, it’s not logical to remove group home care as a solution,” Henry said. “In fact, the

Continued on back...
numbers state the opposite.”

Under the Family First Act, the overwhelming option for DSS would be foster home placements.

“There are situations where a foster family is the right solution, and there are times when it’s not,” Henry said. “We have seen many situations where a child has been forced to move from home to home because the foster family was not equipped to meet the extreme need of that child.”

BCH uses the CARE model (Children and Residential Experiences) in its group homes. Henry said the model gives houseparents and social work staff members the knowledge and structure needed to help children overcome the trauma they have endured.

“Because of the training our houseparents and social works receive, BCH has been able to provide children from failed foster care placements with successful, long-term care,” Henry said.

One of the other advantages to BCH is that it can accept siblings. There are currently 33 sibling groups at BCH across the state.

In foster care, many times foster families are unable to accept multiple children resulting in the brothers and sisters being split apart.

“TO me, this is one of the most important options BCH provides,” Henry explained. “When DSS takes custody, these children are having to say goodbye to their family. Can you imagine how upsetting it is for them to also lose their brothers and sisters? Nothing makes us happier at BCH than to be able to keep siblings together.”

The passage of the Family First Act could happen quickly as the Senate will reconvene in early September after its summer recess. Henry and Blackwell are urging everyone to immediately send letters and emails to North Carolina Senators expressing their concerns.

“It is imperative that everyone who has a heart for children, and a passion for the care and ministry that BCH provides, to let their voices be heard today,” Blackwell implored. “This is a call to action on behalf of the children in our state. They are the potential victims if the Family First Act passes in its current form.

“Urge our Senators to revisit this legislation and delay action until it is amended to provide every option necessary for all children to receive the best possible care.”

Voice your concerns today! Go online to www.bchfamily.org/voice to download a copy of a letter you can send to NC Senators. Send to:

- Richard Burr, 217 Russell Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510, Ph: 202-224-3154
- Thom Tillis, 185 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510, Ph: 202-224-6342

For more information, contact BCH’s Keith Henry at 336-474-1215 or at khenry@bchfamily.org

Note: This article originally ran in the September 2016 edition of Charity & Children, Baptist Children’s Homes of North Carolina’s monthly news publication.