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Pennsylvania Governor Signs Two Bills into Law to Give Foster Youth More “Normal” Lives

Governor Wolf is expected to soon sign a second bill into law to help vulnerable foster youth better succeed. *Act 75 of 2015* was signed into law on December 10th and *HB 1603* will be signed within days. Both bills are in response to the federal *Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act*, which mandates states to implement policies that protect youth from harm and improve their ability to develop skills, talents and connections with family and community.

“Juvenile Law Center’s goal is to improve the odds of success for foster youth across the country. Working with our partners to help legislators craft language that will ensure the maximum benefit to foster youth is one way we strive to achieve that goal,” says Jennifer Pokempner, Supervising Attorney at Juvenile Law Center. “Thousands of foster youth in this country are set up for failure every year when they are suddenly thrust into adulthood without anyone to help them and without the opportunities and skills most youth have as they grow up. Young adults routinely turn to family for help, advice, and an occasional ‘loan,’ but foster youth are simply cut loose, with no safety net to catch them.”

These two laws represent a comprehensive implementation of the federal *Strengthening Families Act* and will give Pennsylvania the best chance to achieve the goals of the law—finding permanency for youth and achieving normalcy. While these terms sound complicated, what the laws seek is simple: opportunities for youth to participate in everyday childhood activities like sports, outings with friends, and family celebrations without having to navigate red tape and unnecessary hoops. The law also requires the child welfare agency to redouble efforts to find every child, including older youth, a permanent family and connections with supportive adults. Pennsylvania is one of a small number of states that now have a comprehensive normalcy law and also requires that all youth are connected with at least one supportive adult as they transition to adulthood. These two bills achieve the following for Pennsylvania foster youth:

- Ensure that youth, especially older youth, find permanent families or are, at the very least, connected to one supportive adult who can help them successfully transition to adulthood.
- By supporting foster parents to exercise their parenting skills, the bills ensure that youth in the child welfare system can participate in normal childhood activities like sports, scouting, and other extracurricular activities without having to get agency or court approval.

- Prevent vulnerable youth from becoming victims of sex trafficking and addresses the needs of youth who run away from foster care.

“As a former foster youth myself who is now using my law degree to help foster youth succeed, I know first hand how vitally important it is to have a real family,” says Stacy Johnson, Director of Permanency at Second Chances in Pittsburgh. “It’s tough to be 18 or 19 years-old and have absolutely no one to turn to for help. And, it is impossible for youth to go to college if they are homeless between semesters. Most people have no idea how foster youth struggle to live normal lives. This legislation will go a long way toward achieving that goal and helping youth become productive adults.”

Both new laws will take effect immediately and, fortunately, Pennsylvania is well poised to implement them. For over six months, the state child welfare agency—DHS—has convened a large group of stakeholders to make recommendations about implementation. These laws align with many of the recommendations already developed by the stakeholders, who will continue to work together on implementation.

[Juvenile Law Center](#) is the nation’s oldest non-profit, public interest law firm for children, working to advance the rights and well-being of youth in the justice and foster care systems.

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