



MEMO

Date: February 1, 2019
RE: Statement on South Carolina
Religious Exemption for Foster Care Agencies

Last week, the Department of Health and Human Services - which oversees foster care and adoption at the federal level - approved a request for child welfare agencies contracting in South Carolina to discriminate based on religious beliefs. This exception from HHS federal non-discrimination policies allows agencies which receive federal funds to reject potential foster parents who do not adhere with their particular religious beliefs.

FosterClub is deeply concerned about the impact of this decision on the children and youth currently in foster care.

We know that individuals and communities of faith play integral roles within child welfare; often, young people navigating through the foster care system find solace in their faith and vital support within faith communities. Many young leaders from FosterClub are beyond grateful for the faith-based care they have been provided through a very difficult time in their life.

We acknowledge the request for exemption in South Carolina may have been crafted with an intention to open doors for faith-based foster care agencies and foster and adoptive parents. However, 'religious refusal' policies and laws provide a license for discriminatory practices in the recruitment of foster and adoptive parents and may close doors to foster and adoptive parents not aligning with particular religious beliefs. This reduces the number of foster and adoptive families available locally to foster children and youth served by those and other agencies. (Many of these [laws](#) also allow discrimination and service denials to foster children and youth based on religious beliefs).

For many young people who have experienced abuse or neglect, foster families provide shelter and space to heal. However, young people also report the difficulties of fitting in to a new family whose religious observances may be different, and sometimes even contrary to their own. Children and youth must be protected from being discriminated against while in care or being forced to conform to a foster care agency or foster family's views regarding religion, or subsequent views that may accompany religious beliefs.

Young Leaders from FosterClub - advocates who are youth and alumni from foster care - have worked for years to identify, create and recommend foster care and adoption policies and practices that will protect young people from discrimination or harm. Allowing discrimination would directly contradict recommendations provided by those with first-hand experience living in the foster care system. For example, the National Foster Youth & Alumni Policy Council provided recommendations on the [Family Foster Home Model Licensing Standards](#). Recommendations include training for foster parents around supporting, protecting and nurturing a young person's identity (including religious), and building cultural competency - and call for accountability within the system for ensuring youth are protected from discrimination.

Nearly half a million children and youth currently in the foster care need our community and nation to step up and provide support so they have what they need to thrive. There must be no space for discrimination in our country's child welfare system.

FosterClub urges HHS to revise its decision and ensure that children, young people and families are fully protected from discrimination within the child welfare system.

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FosterClub is the national network for young people in foster care. Our mission is to lead the efforts of young people in and from foster care to become connected, educated, inspired and represented so they can realize their own personal potential and contribute to a better life for their peers.

Want to stay updated on how FosterClub Young Leaders are responding? Sign up for FosterClub alerts at www.fosterclub.org.