



Background Information on the Suspend the Timeline Not Parental Rights During a Public Health Crisis Act

By introducing this bill, Representative Moore was responding to calls around the nation from front line advocates who were concerned about the effect this virus was having on families in the Child Welfare system. The impact of this virus has led to the prolonged separation of children from their parents – their only means of communication being by phone or video (and sometimes limits on *any* contact). In addition, parents struggling with sobriety, domestic violence, housing instability, and mental health conditions are being denied access to critical services, preventing them from making progress on reunifying their families.

Families involved in the Child Welfare system are already racing against the clock. Under the Adoption and Safe Families Act, families only have 15 months to ameliorate the conditions that caused children to be separated from them and placed into the state's care. While states have a duty to help families reunite, reunification services and case planning have also suffered disruptions during the pandemic.

As a result, children in foster care and group homes now are at grave risk of permanently and irrevocably losing their family ties—including ties to siblings and grandparents-- if their families aren't able to ameliorate the causes for children's removal within the strict federally-imposed time frame. And states are at risk of losing precious federal funds for foster care if they do not initiate termination of parental rights actions by the federal deadline. While there are some limited exceptions to the timelines written into the law, public health emergencies like COVID are not currently recognized in many jurisdictions as a timeline exception. Currently, some jurisdictions make across-the-board exemptions while others leave these life-altering decisions concerning children and families to individual caseworker discretion to grant or deny. Because of COVID, many organizations who offer support and services to these families have shut down, or drastically

changed the way they offer their services. To address these concerns, the bill provides for additional time during a public health crisis, spells out the efforts states still need to make to reunite families and allows states to postpone the termination process without the risk of losing federal funding.