

I am writing to comment on the Notice of Proposed Rule-making at 83 Fed. Reg. 11449 proposing to streamline the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) [RIN 0970-AC72]. I urge HHS to retain the voluntary sexual orientation questions for foster youth and foster and adoptive parents and guardians, as well as the data element on the reason for removal of a child from a home due to “family conflict related to child's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.” Studies show that approximately 19% of foster youth identify as LGBTQ, and they experience worse safety, well-being and permanency outcomes than non-LGBTQ youth. For states and tribes to improve these outcomes and identify best practices for doing so, data collection on the state and national level is urgently needed. Same-sex couples foster at six times the rate of their opposite-sex counterparts, and can provide loving, supportive homes for America’s 400,000+ foster youth.

I also urge HHS to retain the data elements related to the Indian Child Welfare Act, as American Indian and Native Alaskan foster youth are another vulnerable population over-represented in foster care with worse safety, well-being, and permanency outcomes than non-Native youth.

Further, I ask HHS to add voluntary gender identity questions for foster youth over the age of 14 and foster and adoptive parents and guardians to AFCARS. Collecting gender identity data as well as sexual orientation data will help states and tribes develop streamlined, comprehensive services.

Point in time studies for homeless LGBTQ+ youth in cities across the nation show 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ+ and DC showed 53% being LGBTQ+ with 26% leaving an abusive family. These youth that are seen as disposable simply for being who they are need to be accounted for in appropriate data collection because of their disproportionate vulnerabilities while making up an assumed 15% of the populace and making up 40+% of the homeless youth numbers too many of these children are falling through the cracks of systemic oversight.

Nat Paul