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Advocates Urge Voters to Reject Initiated Act 1 *Arkansas Ballot Initiative Endangers Children and Youth*

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Voices for America's Children today joins Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, a member of Voices network, in opposing Arkansas Initiated Act 1 because it will endanger thousands of foster children awaiting a permanent home.

“With more than 3,700 children currently residing in foster care, and 500 who are waiting to be adopted on any given day, Arkansas’ children cannot afford to be denied the opportunity of finding a permanent home,” said Bill Bentley, Voices President and CEO. “Currently, over 200 foster youth in Arkansas leave foster care at age 18 without ever gaining a permanent home. This ballot initiative would increase this number dramatically and result in the state turning its back on its most vulnerable children. Voices strongly urges all voters to reject this measure.”

On November 4th, Arkansas citizens will vote on Initiated Act 1, which bans unmarried cohabitating couples from serving as foster or adoptive parents. This ballot initiative applies equally to heterosexual and homosexual unmarried couples as well as to all adoptions from public and private child-serving agencies.

Rich Huddleston, executive director of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, said Act 1 is so harmful to children that it is drawing national attention.

“We hope that Arkansas voters will hear this message from child advocates across the nation: All foster children deserve to find a home that best meets their needs,” Huddleston said.

“The safety and well-being of children should not be politicized,” Bentley said. “Trained child welfare professionals, including judges, social workers, court-appointed advocates, and others representing the best interests of the child must be allowed to make these critical decisions as to when and where a child should be placed on a case-by-case basis,” Bentley continued. “Enacting a rule or law that bans qualified and loving individuals from serving as foster or adoptive parents places these children in jeopardy.”

Coming shortly after President Bush signed the broadest improvement to child welfare services in over a decade, The Arkansas Family Council's effort takes a step away from meeting the needs of children. Legislation signed by the President on Oct.7, *The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act*, (P.L. 110-351) will allow Arkansas to use kinship and guardianship placements as well as provide additional supports for foster youth up to their 21st birthday. Initiated Act 1 threatens the ability of Arkansas to take full advantage of the positive improvements available in this law.

"Many states speak of child-welfare reform in order to improve the outcomes of the children and families they serve," Bentley said. "This measure could effectively close the door for foster children. All children, but especially foster and adoptive children, need safe and loving homes. This measure is wrong-headed, short-sighted, and should be soundly rejected by the voters."

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Voices for America's Children is a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit child advocacy organization committed to speaking out for the well-being of children at the local, state and federal levels of government. With 60 member organizations in nearly every state, as well as the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands, we advocate for effective public policies in order to improve the lives of all children throughout the United States. For more information, please visit www.voices.org.

Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families is a statewide, non-profit child advocacy organization established in 1977. Our mission is to ensure that all children and their families have the resources and opportunities to lead healthy and productive lives and to realize their full potential. For more information please visit: www.aradvocates.org.