

Heart Gallery Displays the Faces of Foster Care

By [Laura Barron-Lopez](#)

Roll Call Staff

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A group of 50 foster children will look for a second chance on the Hill this week.

Photos of the children, one from each state, will be in the Russell Rotunda through Friday to draw attention to National Adoption Month. The exhibit was put together by the National Heart Gallery, a nonprofit group that promotes adoption throughout the country. Similar displays have helped place foster kids with permanent families.

"There have been about 5,000 children who have found homes directly from the Heart Gallery," organizer Laurie Sherman Graff said. "We have prospective parents here to look at the exhibit and other collaborating foundations."

A kickoff for the show was held last week. Sens. [Mary Landrieu](#) (D-La.) and [Chuck Grassley](#) (R-Iowa) and Reps. [Karen Bass](#) (D-Calif.) and [Tom Marino](#) (R-Pa.) attended the event.




The children in the photos are labeled as hard to place because of their ages, pasts or special needs.

One of the backers of the exhibit is the Freddie Mac Foundation, a nonprofit which has put up its own exhibits of foster children in Washington, D.C., in the past. Director Renette Oklewicz stressed the importance of getting Congress and the nation's policymakers involved.




Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call


Rep. Karen Bass and Sen. Chuck Grassley chat at an exhibit of photographs of children in the foster care system. Organized by the National Heart Gallery, the show aims to bring attention to adoption issues in conjunction with National Adoption Month.

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Members at the kickoff agreed, saying they hope to implement better legislation to meet the needs of foster youth. As a start, Grassley said he has tried to undo older legislation which worked against the children's best interests.

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"There were these perverse incentives for federal aid to states that seemed to keep people in foster care longer than they should," he said. "Because the more people in foster care, the more money the state got." On a more personal note, Marino shared stories about his two adopted children and his experience with foster children. He emphasized that the kids are simply looking for love.

The exhibits began in 2001 in New Mexico and have now reached all 50 states. There are nearly 425,000 foster children in America and more than 100,000 kids ready to be adopted.

Landrieu, who has adopted children as well, was deeply touched by the photos on display. Before the Heart Gallery exhibits were started, pictures of foster children were grainy and dark, similar to a mug shot for a criminal. Now, Landrieu pointed out, the photos of the children taken by professional volunteer photographers show the individuality of each child and their unique personalities.

Those involved hope that through exhibits such as the Heart Gallery's, a dent can be made in the number of children without homes and that, by raising awareness, legislation will effect change.

"Twenty-eight thousand will age out of the system without ever having had the support of a permanent family. For kids in foster care, the state is their only parent," Bass said. "And it is our responsibility to make sure that our children have every opportunity to become productive citizens."

LauraBarronLopez@rollcall.com | [@lbarronlopez](https://twitter.com/lbarronlopez)