

## ***IN THE STATES: COLORADO FOSTER CARE YOUTH AND GOVERNOR BILL RITTER "BRIDGE THE GAP" TO SUPPORT FAMILY CONNECTIONS***

*DENVER, COLORADO.* Colorado Governor Bill Ritter has signed the first bill of the 2008 legislative session, creating new opportunities sought by foster care youth in the state to maintain family connections. A group of young adults who recently aged out of the state's foster care system had identified the need to formalize their ability to maintain connections with their own siblings and then - with the support of the Mile High United Way's "Bridging the Gap" initiative for foster care youth - wrote a legislative remedy, found sponsors for the bill, and testified before committees that eventually delivered unanimous support from the Colorado Legislature. Joining Governor Ritter at the bill-signing ceremony were two former foster care youth who helped forward HB 1006.

Governor Ritter noted, "When it comes to foster care and foster children, we know from experience that permanence and connections to family can make a tremendous difference." Governor Ritter added: "A sibling may be the only sense of permanence, safety or family that a foster child has. So when a foster child makes a request to see their brother or sister, we should listen and put it at the top of the priority list. It might seem like a little thing, but it's not." Research has shown that foster care youth are at high risk of homelessness when they leave care, and research on the chronically homeless adult population notes a relation between homelessness experienced in youth and subsequent adult experiences of homelessness.

The National Governors Association last year surveyed state policies for aging out youth and noted the important role that Governors play in achieving better outcomes for youth : "Because governors have the power to set agendas, assign responsibilities, and redirect resources, they are uniquely positioned to set the direction of foster care reforms in their states. Governors can ensure youth transitioning out of foster care have access to a comprehensive array of programs and services that address their permanency, health, economic, life skills, and housing needs; promote opportunities for foster youth to provide input on programs and services; develop policies and partnerships that seamlessly connect child welfare with other youth-serving systems; and call on the business, volunteer, and philanthropic communities to sponsor work experience, mentoring, and asset development opportunities.

Since 2006, NGA has been working with six states - California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, and South Carolina - in the NGA Policy Academy on Youth Transitioning Out of Foster Care on research and best practices for successful transition. Additionally, NGA has convened a six-state academy on young adults with disabilities, noting: "Young people with disabilities are more likely to drop out of high school; less likely to receive job training, tutoring, or counseling; more likely to be arrested after exiting school; are 5 times less likely to enter post-secondary school than peers; experience a 70 percent unemployment rate; are 4 times more likely to be in foster care; are at high risk for becoming homeless; and live in poverty at twice the rate of individuals without a disability. " States in this academy are Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Kansas, Montana, and Washington.