

# Of Bureaucrats and Bunk Beds

Want to take in foster kids in Maryland? You can't let them sleep in bunk beds.

The fine print of Maryland's foster care regulations says: "Each child shall have an individual bed that may not be stacked in vertical bunk bed formation."

In practice that means that if you don't have a lot of extra space or money, you may be disqualified from foster parenting—even if you're a relative who knows and loves the child and desperately wants to keep the family together.

The rule, one hopes, was created to make sure kids have a safe place to sleep. But other states approve of bunk beds. Some agencies even provide them! After all, the beds themselves are not the big picture. "The ultimate objective is to keep these families together," says Ana Beltran, Director of the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network, a nonprofit that focuses on intergenerational issues.

Naturally, you don't want a foster family's biological kid living it up in a Barbie bedroom while the foster kids are crammed into a closet. But other than that, the goal should be to find a great home, not a great bedroom set.

Maryland should be particularly aware of the downside of ruling out homes, considering a new report that found the state temporarily housing some kids in office buildings and hotels while an appropriate placement was sought.

Beltran tried to find out if Maryland's rule was passed in the wake of a bunk bed tragedy but could not find one. Usually, that's what precedes idiosyncratic laws. Beltran recalled another law saying foster families could not have one specific breed of dog—"Not even a pit bull!"—after that breed had bitten a child. But the bunk bed provision remained a mystery.

Ruth White, Executive Director of the National Center for Housing & Child Welfare, asked some current and former foster care youth if they had any idea where the policy might come from. They thought it made sense in only one kind of case: When a foster family effectively starts running a group home without calling it that. White heard of one foster family with enough bunk beds for 10 kids.

In other cases, when it really is just a family trying to fit a kid or kids into their home, White added, the authorities may ignore the bunk bed mandate. Good! That kind of flexibility is smart and humane. But if a law requires ignoring, shouldn't it just be eliminated?

"Doing anything by legislation takes longer than just encouraging people not to enforce it," White said.

Sonya Benjay, a grandmother in Maryland, is grateful for the crumbs of common sense tossed her way. She was living in Kentucky when her three grandchildren—two girls and a boy, all under 10—needed a foster home. "At the time, I was living in a small place by myself," she says. While child protective services allowed her to take the kids in, "They indicated to me that I had to get a bigger place"—and gave her just two weeks to get one. So, she went looking for a two-bedroom home she could move into immediately—and bunk beds.

"And they said, 'You can't put them in bunks.'" Benjay told them that finding a new place to live, moving all her belongings *and* buying three new beds within two weeks was asking too much, and the state relented. They said she could have bunk beds.

Miraculously, Benjay managed to jump through all the hoops, "with no help from the state. I had to dig into my retirement."

But she got the kids. She even managed to cram three beds into one of the bedrooms to make sure no one could complain about a

bunk situation. Because when you know that bureaucrats are evaluating your everyday parenting decisions, it's awfully hard to sleep easy.

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