

A Way Back Home: Preserving Families and Reducing the Need for Foster Care

United States Senate Committee on Finance

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Written Testimony of Ann Silverberg Williamson, Executive Director
Utah Department of Human Services

Chairman Hatch, Ranking Member Wyden and Members of the Senate Finance Committee, it is a privilege to appear before you representing the Utah Department of Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on our child welfare practice. In Utah, we value not only what is proven to be in the best interest of children, youth and families, but also what is cost effective. Thank you for your leadership to prioritize this discussion.

Several facts about Utah's child welfare model illustrate the strengths of our approach:

- With one of the nation's highest percentages of minors per capita, Utah has one of the lowest entry rates into the foster care system: 3.1 for every 1,000; the national average is 6.1 for every 1,000. This demonstrates the existing focus we have on family, community and prevention.
- The average length of stay for children in foster care is 10.4 months; the national average is 13.4 months, emphasizing our interest in safely reunifying and finding kinship care.
- 27% of children in the state's foster care system are adopted; 19% is the national average illustrating highlighting Utah's commitment to providing children a permanent home to grow in safely.
- The total child welfare annual budget is \$114 million state and \$57 million federal.

Following the changes that allowed Utah to successfully exit a settlement agreement; our child welfare system was touted for the effectiveness of our practice. We incorporated family team meetings and rigorous qualitative case and process reviews into our work. We established an independent Ombudsman's office and a Fatality Review Panel in addition to

other legislative and community engagement forums to assure transparency and timely services to those in need.

In recent years, we identified the need to build equally effective in home supports to safely keep children with their families, reducing the need for foster care.

Regardless how well a foster care system operates, the fact remains that children are best served in homes, surrounded by family, familiar schools and community. Ask any child and they will tell you that a home with loving adults is their heart's desire.

The voice of one brave young woman, who aged out of the foster care system prior to our recent changes, underscores the opportunity we have to do better. While her narrative is one of triumph, it is rich with lessons for those of us able to influence the system.

As a young child, Beth was removed from her mother's care for the neglect that resulted from her mom's untreated mental illness. Instead of remaining within her home with parenting supports, behavioral health care and coordinated community services this child was swept into a perilous journey between multiple foster homes, engagement in the juvenile justice system, truancy, periods of homelessness - - - the tragic symptoms of Beth's anger, resentment and trauma of being without her family and her home.

When asked why she continued to run away from foster homes, Beth plainly said it was to get back to her mother. When asked why she behaved so poorly, she spoke with equal candor that she hated feeling out of control and without a voice. Fortunately for Beth, the guiding influence of her final foster father who convinced her of the importance of education, combined with the wisdom of her caseworker who motivated her to seek more

for herself than the path she was on, this courageous young woman graduated from high school, got a job with child welfare after college and is now in law school. Hers was a rare success story in that era. Her insights are profound and motivating to us today because we know we can do better. We can avoid this kind of human and financial cost, and as the measured results our current practice prove, we are doing so.

Poet Maya Angelou's words concisely describe Utah's commitment to serve children and their families: "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

With research, social science discoveries and evidence of trauma-informed care, Utah believes we can better serve the short and long term interests of those in need of a child welfare system. Supporting safe care for children *in their homes* without separating them from family in foster care is less traumatic and less costly. Additionally, a multi-generation family service approach proves more effective in breaking cycles of dependence on prolonged, expensive government programs.

The opportunity to apply for a Title IV-E waiver was ideal for Utah because it allows us to invest in solutions. Our demonstration project called *HomeWorks* was initiated in late 2013 and is in the process of being replicated statewide through this year.

Without the waiver, the federal IV-E dollars are limited to supporting foster care services. Now, *HomeWorks* is allowing us to invest federal funds toward supports that have much greater value—not only to children and youth by keeping families whole—but also to the tax-payers receiving a greater return on the dollar.

For the average cost of serving one child in a foster care home for one year, we are able to serve *eleven families* through *HomeWorks* practice and supports. For the average cost of serving one foster care child in a residential group setting for one year, we are able to serve *thirty-four families* through *HomeWorks*. These are the compelling proofs of the sound business of this practice, while the humanitarian merits of investing in services to keep children safe with family make this approach essential.

For children and youth whose safety can be attained with specified family services in the home, we need not commit them to foster care and the cascade of potentially negative consequences that can follow.

One of our *HomeWorks* staff worked recently with the family of Jim, a young teen who was on track to enter foster care. He was failing in middle school, had repeated aggression toward his elderly parent - a single grandmother who raised him from infancy - and behavioral outbursts causing concern about harming himself or others. Exhausted and uncertain, Jim's grandmother prepared to relinquish her child.

Applying the *HomeWorks* model of practice has preserved him safely in his home, has offered peer parenting to the grandmother, additional extended family are more involved in care and together a school counselor and behavior therapist are working in a coordinated way to support Jim.

This is one of more than 1,000 *HomeWorks* cases that the waiver has allowed us to serve in this way. We are seeing daily the positive outcomes that result. Rather than providing a

temporary fix, we work with families to achieve long-term behavioral change that reduces risk of repeat maltreatment and ongoing involvement with government interventions.

The evidence based tools and strategies of *HomeWorks* include:

- Structured Decision Making at intake
- Advanced professional approach to caseworker training
- Consistent use of the child and family assessment
- Increased frequency and length of staff time with the family in addition to community supports for sustained family resiliency

Early results are positive.

In the first region to pilot *HomeWorks*, we have experienced a year over year growth rate of 11% for in home services while the statewide year over year growth was 3.6%.

Also, the same region has decreased its population of children in foster care by 4.4% from the prior year, compared to the state's average 3% reduction.

We respect the temporary nature of a waiver and the time-limited opportunity to learn from what states are demonstrating. Utah is focused on shoring up the practices we have begun; therefore, the Family Stability and Kinship Care Act proposed by Ranking Member Wyden is an encouraging measure.

We would like to see financial investment in child welfare practice informed by evidence. The key components of the proposed bill, including the target population, eligibility determination, service offerings and accountability for outcomes reinforce Utah's

experience. Federal statute that emphasizes early intervention, family development and local partnerships that cultivate community ownership for a child's well-being will strengthen this country's child welfare system and benefit our citizenry in total.

We seek to partner with you to finance a system that strengthens families and is accountable to the outcomes of sustained child safety, permanency and wellbeing. We look forward to the alignment of public child welfare policy, finance and practice for the greater public good.

Thank you.