



Testimony of:

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Improving Programs Designed to Protect At-Risk Youth

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When a child is adopted by a family many people like to believe that the story is over, the child and the family will live happily ever after, just like in the fairy tales. However, children in the child welfare system often have suffered abuse and neglect, experienced the incomprehensible loss of the only family they knew and have experienced multiple moves from one foster home to another. For these children, the story has only begun. Often, adoptive families are the ones who listen to the stories of their children – how they were left alone, hungry, wondering if anyone would ever come back for them. These families are the ones who watch the rage spill over as they try to draw closer to their children. They are the ones who take the hits from the child even though they did not inflict the original pain. Adoptive families are the ones who lay awake at night wondering if the child they are raising will ever be successful, will ever be emotionally whole. Adoption is only the beginning of a long and painful healing journey.

Sympathy is frequently afforded to orphaned children, however, the ongoing needs of the families who open their hearts and homes to these children are often overlooked. There are some biological families who may say, “Well my children are pretty tough too, why do adoptive families need additional help and services?” It is only those families who do not know the devastating impact of trauma and overwhelming loss who say these things.

In a recent study by Wendy A. Walsh and Marybeth J. Mattingly, Long –Term Foster Care – Different Needs, Different Outcomes, many of the children who linger in foster care are those with emotional and behavioral issues. These issues make it difficult to reunify children with these challenges with their biological families. Twenty seven percent of children aged 11 – 18 in out-of-home care have clinical levels of emotional problems and 41 percent have clinical levels of behavioral problems. Children exhibiting no emotional problems are reunified with their biological families 31 percent of the time while only 19

percent of children with emotional problems are able to return home. Children who cannot be returned to their biological families are being placed for adoption.

If we expect children placed for adoption from foster care to be able to overcome the tremendous challenges that lay before them, then we must join together to help their families access necessary services that they would otherwise not be able to access. Many of these families call our organization each day, reaching out for help and support. Most of these families have adopted older children, hoping to give them a chance at a successful life. These families often do not learn the depth of their child(ren)'s wounds until after the adoption is finalized, when many of the supportive services from the government are no longer available to them. The wounds from their children's past are exhibited through behavior that is complex, and at times, extremely difficult and even dangerous for parents to deal with, many telling us they cannot go on for one more day.

These families need more than a listening ear, they need access to competent professionals who understand the dynamics involved when bringing a traumatized child in to a new family. They need respite care so that they can get much needed rest to continue to parent. They need ongoing training to help them solve the mysteries of their child's behavior, give them skills to help them parent effectively and help them understand and meet the special needs that their child might have. They need access to support groups with peers who understand the unique challenges that they face and give them encouragement to keep going, no matter what. They need funding for services and special equipment that Medicaid does not cover. We often hear families say of our post-adoption program's family funding component, "I'm not sure what we would do without this."

Through our experience, conducting post-adoption programs both in Colorado and Utah, we have learned the important link between recruitment of quality adoptive parents and post-adoption services. If families know that there are

post-adoption resources available to them, they are more likely to consider adopting. This is especially important in our attempt to recruit families for children who have severe physical, mental or emotional disabilities, requiring specialized services that are often too expensive for many families.

All too often we hear from adoptive families considering “dissolving” an adoption. These families are in crisis and are considering returning the child back to the care of the state. If this occurs, the child may “age out” of the system and continue the cycle of abuse with his/her own children. Well-prepared and well-supported adoptive families are the key to breaking this vicious cycle. When good parenting is modeled, these children develop new tools and capacities that will help them be successful parents themselves someday. To avoid “failed adoptions” and this devastating cycle, comprehensive post-adoption programs are vital.

Even before adoptions are finalized, families need to be connected to services and know that support is there when they need it. We have seen that the families who have supportive communities are more likely to persevere when the journey of adoption becomes difficult. The Adoption Exchange’s Colorado Post-Adoption Resource Center has a “Prospective Parent Specialist” on staff, who helps families navigate through the process of adopting while connecting the families to important post-adoption resources and services, even before their adoption is finalized. We are encouraged to see an increasing number of families better equipped to handle the challenges that can come with adoption.

The Adoption Exchange is one of a handful of agencies that are stepping forward to meet the critical needs of adoptive families, before, during and after the adoptive placement. We have served over 2,850 adoptive families through our post-adoption programs in Colorado and Utah which include services such as classes, lending libraries, funding, referrals for support groups, respite care and adoption-competent mental health professionals. We believe that a holistic

perspective on adoption, which includes post-adoption support, is the only way in which children will stay out of the foster care system and within loving families. Funding for these services is critical to the healing that can best occur in a family. We ask that you consider the lives of these children and their families and that you make the difficult choices with the limited funding available to help these families step forward to break the cycle of abuse and neglect.

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