

EVAN B. DONALDSON

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Testimony of:

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Subcommittee on Human Resources

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Improving Programs Designed to Protect At-Risk Youth

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We would like to thank Chairman Davis, Congressman Doggett and members of the Subcommittee for holding this hearing on the reauthorization of Title IV-B child welfare programs. We are also grateful for the opportunity to present written testimony on the funding of these vitally important services to a very vulnerable population of children – those who have experienced abuse or neglect or are at risk of maltreatment.

We are Adam Pertman, Executive Director, and Susan Livingston Smith, Program Director, of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, an independent and nonpartisan research, policy and education organization that was created for one principal reason: to provide accurate, knowledge-based information for practitioners, policymakers, journalists and others so that we, as a society, can shape better laws, policies and practices to improve the lives of everyone touched by adoption, especially children.

Our testimony relates specifically to the reauthorization of Title IV-B, subpart 2, the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program, which includes the requirement that at least 20 percent of these funds be allocated to the category of services defined as “adoption promotion and support.” Our testimony is based on extensive research that the Institute has conducted on the needs of children and families after adoption – in particular those families adopting children from foster care – as well as on the over 20 years of research on post-adoption services for child welfare adoptive families that Program Director Susan Smith has conducted.¹

The Donaldson Adoption Institute has partnered with a number of other child welfare and adoption organizations across the country to ensure that adoption encompasses not only the placement of children into families, but also includes post-adoption services that enable these families to succeed in raising their children to healthy adulthood.

For many years, the federal government has aggressively promoted the adoption of children from foster care who cannot return home. It has done so largely through legislation such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and, most recently, through reauthorization and improvement of the Adoption Incentive Program in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008.

These legal and policy changes have succeeded in increasing adoptions from the child welfare system from approximately 15,000 in 1988 to 57,456 in FY2009; in all, approximately three-quarters of a million children have been adopted from foster care over the past 15 years. It is important to note that each adoption from foster care brings a net savings of \$143,000 to state and federal governments (Barth, Lee, Wildfire, & Guo, 2006).

The Need for Post-Adoption Services

Many children come to their families with elevated risks for future developmental issues because of adverse prenatal and early-life experiences; inadequate nurturing; prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol; physical and sexual abuse; and multiple placements in care, among other reasons. As Commissioner Bryan Samuels testified to this subcommittee,

¹ The Institute’s 2010 report, “Keeping the Promise: The Critical Need for Post-Adoption Services to Enable Children and Families to Succeed,” can be accessed at: http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2010_10_promises.php

experiences of abuse and neglect have left a “traumatic fingerprint” on the development of these children.

Many adoptive parents are not prepared to understand or successfully navigate these challenges. Studies show that about 45 percent of these children fall in the “clinical range” on standardized measures of behavior problems many years after their adoptions, and some have very severe behavior problems that lead their parents to seek help repeatedly, often with little success (Rosenthal & Groze, 1994; Howard & Smith, 2003; Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009).

The failed efforts of many families to get effective help have led to the development of specialized post-adoption services in many states. The primary types of services include: education and training, support groups, information and referral, respite, and clinical services. Adoptive families’ service needs range along a continuum, with many more families needing less-intensive services such as education and support and only a small minority of families needing high-end services such as respite or residential care.

In an overwhelming majority of cases, adoption is genuinely beneficial and permanent; however, for the minority of adopted children with high-end needs, intense and ongoing difficulties can result in children being returned to care. When adoptions do fail, the economic and social costs to our country are considerable, and the toll on the children and families involved is even greater. Furthermore, for every adoption that doesn’t work out, there are others – though it must be stressed still a minority – in which the families struggle every day to address the serious problems their children experienced *before* they were adopted.

The cost of compounding these problems is extremely high for children, families, and society. Some adoptive placements disrupt before they are finalized (10-15%), and children return to foster care, resulting in higher governmental costs. Some children are returned to foster care or residential treatment after adoption, and sometimes parents legally dissolve their adoptions.² Both failed adoptions and adoptions in which children have severe issues that are not being adequately addressed have a clear impact on society, but they also take a huge human toll on the affected children and families.

Raising a child with chronic behavioral problems typically results in high levels of parenting and family stress and can weaken the marital relationship, which in turn threatens family stability and the adoptive relationship. One parent served through an adoption preservation program described her experience as follows:

We were lost, sinking, destroying our family rapidly before these services. We spent thousands upon thousands of dollars, not counting the time involved in seeking help. This was the only place we could find help, information, relief ... an understanding of how these troubled kids work and how to try and cope ... and to still love them. It’s so hard to put into words the devastating effects on the family ... the destruction, the financial drain, the breakdown of the marriage and physical health.

² A recent study using FY2005 AFCARS national data identified 3,166 children exiting care that year who were adopted prior to their most recent entry into care. Of those in the latter category, the adoptions of 1,241 children (39%) were classified as legally dissolved, while most (59%) of the remaining children leaving care were reunified with their adoptive parents (Festinger & Maza, 2009).

Recommendation

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute recommends that a dedicated funding stream for post-adoption services be created by redefining the service category of “adoption promotion and support” in Title IV-B, subpart 2, to become “adoption and post-adoption services;” and by requiring that a portion of these funds be expended on post-adoption services. We also concur with the recommendation of the American Humane Association that this committee consider new language that would direct savings from the adoption assistance delink in the Fostering Connections Act to be reinvested into post-adoption services.

According to available evidence, states currently spend all or most of the funds designated for adoption promotion and support on activities related to achieving adoptions for children in care. A report from the National Conference of State Legislatures (Christian, 2002), citing a 2002 review by James Bell and Associates, reported that 1 percent of total child welfare spending from federal and state sources went to “adoption promotion and support.” States most commonly reported spent these funds on adoptive parent recruitment and training, home studies, and worker training – i.e., all activities focused on adoption promotion.

Our nation has made considerable progress in finding adoptive homes for children who have suffered from maltreatment (though we need to continue making progress, particularly for older youth in care). Now we need to shift the paradigm so that our priority moves from focusing almost solely on achieving permanency to also assuring that adoptive parents receive the services that will allow them to raise their sons and daughters to healthy adulthood. The federal government must take the lead in making a commitment to the development of post-adoption services. Guaranteeing this commitment in law and through a dedicated funding stream is the most effective way to serve and preserve families across our country, today and into the future.

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