

## **Tori Hope Petersen**

Good morning. My name is Tori Hope Petersen.

I am grateful to be here and I am thankful to Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Neal, and the members of the Committee for convening this hearing on reauthorizing Title 4-B.

Before entering into the system, I lived with my mom who I wholeheartedly believe did the absolute best with what she had, but she struggled with mental illness due to her own childhood trauma and being sex trafficked as a young teen into her adulthood.

I went into the foster care system twice in my life due to the physical and emotional abuse I endured. I hoped that going into the foster care system would be healing and allow me to escape the chaos of my first family, but instead I entered into a different form of chaos when I entered the system. Within months I was separated from my little sister, I struggled with the effects of complex trauma, and I moved through twelve different foster homes during my time in care.

However, in my final foster home, my foster mom took me to church regularly and I was reunited with a woman named Tonya who when I lived with my mom would come and pick me up when situations would become volatile. Tonya worked for a nonprofit that mentored kids coming from hard places and she became a mentor to me.

The leadership of my church allowed me opportunities and encouraged me to share my story. By witnessing their love for me and other kids in the foster care system, I began to believe that Jesus might love me too, and I gained a confidence I didn't have before.

At the same time, I was running high school track, and my track coach became my father figure. After I was emancipated from the foster care system, he invited me into his home, and under his training I became a five-time state champion in track, and in 2018 I became a part of the 3% of foster youth to obtain a bachelor's degree or higher when I graduated from Hillsdale College.

Now, I am an author and public speaker. I share my story to help organizations raise funds to serve vulnerable children. I help communities and churches become equipped to fulfill the call of James 1:27, which is to care for the orphan and the widow. And my greatest honor is that I am a wife and a mom. I have two biological children, an adopted adult son, my husband and I are kinship providers for my biological sibling and we are also foster parents.

As I look back on my experience, I see the crucial role my community, nonprofits, and church played in bringing me to where I am today. I believe I wouldn't be where I am without them

which is why I feel it is crucial that organizations, churches, and communities are supported through Title 4-B.

It has been over ten years since I aged out of the foster care system, and there was not as much government assistance as there is today for youth coming out of care. Outside of being on food stamps for about six months, I received no financial support or government assistance after I was emancipated.

However, I believe this experience was good for me as it taught me the value of hard work. I earned and saved money by working in a factory, in a diner as a waitress, and through various internships from organizations and my church. Handouts in the form of checks made me feel more like a charity case, but having a community of people believing in me enough to empower me, give me purposeful jobs, and mentor me to gain the skills needed to live a prosperous life is what has helped me break generational cycles of poverty, abuse, neglect, homelessness and so on.

I was prepared to step into higher education, the workforce, and manage my life when I turned eighteen because of the community that wrapped around me and because of the way I was prepared *before* I was emancipated. I left the system with knowledge on how to live independently, and with a community to guide me.

Over the past couple of years, my husband and I have mentored a handful of former foster youth by volunteering for a local nonprofit. We witness them live off the free housing and stipends given to them, while not maintaining work. I believe these tangible resources can be enabling more than they are empowering. Today, we gather, concerned that only 55% of former foster youth are employed as adults, yet the stipends and assistance handed out allows for many of these young adults to live off of them without having steady employment or consistently pursuing higher education. We see these young adults continually fall out of these programs and into homelessness because the tangible resources are not long-term solutions to the problems these youth face. Real relationships, connectedness, and love are.

While it is Title 4-E that offers youth in foster care these tangible resources and addresses these issues, it is crucial that we address Title 4-E alongside Title 4-B. Because right now, it seems that the system is giving young adults basic necessities that they need to survive, but when we invest in them to have deep and authentic relationships in their communities we give them what they need to thrive.

When I was a child in foster care I found it very difficult to attach to the foster parents I lived with, and as a foster mom now, I experience that attachment is something that has to be worked at. It doesn't always happen instantaneously. Because of this foster children often experience a gap in connectedness in their lives, which is detrimental to relationships and mental health.

I believe our society would significantly enhance outcomes for youth if we created greater incentives for churches, communities, and nonprofits to wrap around children, foster families, and kinship providers before youth turn eighteen, because the church, faith-based organizations, and our communities are a central component to the needs and well being of foster children, as they help prepare them for adulthood.

As a parent, I would not cover my adult child's housing, hand them checks, and send them on their way to attempt to manage it, because in the end that doesn't teach them self-governance nor does it require them to gain the skills they need to be successful adults.

As the famous quote states, "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."

As a youth, I was fortunate enough to form relationships with community members, like my track coach, Tonya and others from my church, and overtime they became the people who filled the role of my family. What they have given me, taught me, and how they have guided me has been invaluable.

I would also encourage the Committee to think about ways the program could be modernized to ensure states are providing former foster youth and parents with an opportunity to provide feedback and to play a role in decision making that directly impacts the child, particularly as it relates to keeping children with siblings and choosing kin, especially in situations of permanency.

It is important that federal funding streams like Title 4-B are updated to meet the current challenges in the child welfare system. A special emphasis should be placed on community relationships and the role they play in helping youth gain the valuable skills they need for adulthood.

If you are a child or youth coming from a hard place, I hope you hear that you are deserving of love, and that there is a beautiful purpose and plan for your life.

I have felt because of the way I speak about my faith, that my voice is not always welcome. So I want to especially express gratitude to the Chairman Jason Smith for offering me the opportunity to advocate for youth in this way, and finding value in my lived experience as a former foster youth but more importantly as a child of God. Thank you.