



Testimony on the Child and Family Services Division before the
Appropriations Sub-Committee on Health and Human Services
February 4, 2011

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, for the record my name is Geoff Birnbaum, Executive Director for Youth Homes Inc. Youth Homes is a non-profit operating out of Missoula, Montana and serving youth and families from throughout Western Montana with homes and offices in Missoula, Hamilton, Kalispell, Ronan, Polson and Helena. We provide an array of services including emergency shelter care, long term group care, therapeutic group care, therapeutic foster care, therapeutic family support, adoptions and support services, supported independent living services, and wilderness treatment to over 145 children and families every day and over 600 children every year. We have operated since 1971 and served over 9000 children and their families in that time.

I started my career in State Government back in 1971 with then SRS and was here when the movement to de-institutionalize special populations was begun. At that time we had about 500 children in state institutions even though more than 80% of the young people there had not committed a crime to person or property but rather they were runaways, orphans, ungovernable, truant or simply wards of the State of Montana. Many of us thought we should do better than that for these children of our State. Then and today, many Montanans talk about children in words like "they are our greatest resource". But back in 1975 when we were closing the Montana Children's Center in Twin Bridges the legislature allocated less for the hundred children being moved to community programs than was allocated in the coming biennium to maintain the facilities in that institution so it could be prepared for sale.

In the late nineties another movement was ignited with the passing of the Adoption and Safe Children's Act of 1996 by Congress. It mandated States to move children in foster care toward permanency and the movement is starting to find greater momentum today. Please don't make the same mistake and fail to give the Department and its providers the resources to invest in the State's most vulnerable children. It would be great if we could identify just one single service to invest through but one size doesn't fit all and we need a variety of services to serve a variety of situations.

Let me start by stating my full support for the Division, its budget and its efforts to protect children and support families. Child Protective workers are among the hardest working people I know with one of the hardest jobs and they deserve the resources and support to

make difficult decisions about life and death. It seems that vacancy savings within their ranks risk the lives of children.

To do the job of protecting children they need supportive services and some very critical ones are in the in-home services contracts that have been cut from the base budget for the Department. These critical services include supervised visitations which brings professionals into critical contact with at risk families when the Department is forced to be making critical long term decisions. Along with that there are family-based services that follow the child back into the family and give the family the support and skills to heal and reunite.

When a child is in crisis we need available emergency and short term shelter. These homes and programs provide safety, crisis intervention, and stabilization and can give vital assessments of the strengths and challenges of the child as they move back toward a long term and permanent solution. Think emergency rooms! But for these services providers are being paid the very worst rates for their services of any of the contracted services the State purchases. We operate and have operated a shelter since 1976 in Missoula. With the 1st and last designed matrix for payment set in the late 80s, that rate was set at less than the actual costs for the State to provide it itself and rates since then have failed year after year to keep up with increased costs. Today, to just balance our annual operating budget for our Shirley Miller Attention Home, we now must find other funds totaling \$130,000 this year! If the current budget stands and no rate adjustments are made, called "current law funding" as state provided services at budgeted, shelter providers will be facing a 3 year freeze in rates and a fall back to rates in fiscal '09. That is not fair and will threaten the existence of these services and, at best, challenge the quality the children deserve and need.

Finally, there have been some funds appropriated to support young people aging out of foster care. These are the 100s of children who are wards of our State and depend on us all for their well being into the future. These are the most vulnerable Montana kids who are moving to adulthood. The average son or daughter is able to find economic independence from their parents at age 27 or 28 yet we expect these young people to make the transition at age 18 without a support system in place. National statistics show that young people aging out of foster care are six times more likely to be homeless within one year of emancipation! Please support these young Montanans by placing funds back into the budget to support the State's contracts with providers to offer "supported independent living services." Give them a chance and overall give us the resources to protect and grow our young people who most need our help.

Thank you!

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