

February 4, 2011

Joint Appropriations Subcommittee on Health and Human Services  
RE: Public Testimony, Health Resources Division

Mister Chair and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Kelly Zimmerman, and I am the Family Developer (licensing specialist) with the Adoption & Family Support Program (AFSP) at Intermountain here in Helena. I have worked at Intermountain for 11 years. Previous to my current position, I worked as a direct care attachment counselor on Intermountain's residential campus, and as a treatment coordinator with community-based children and families with the AFSP program.

I would like to tell you a story about a six-year-old child I directly worked with in my role as a treatment coordinator. I will call the child Sarah to maintain confidentiality. Sarah entered the foster care system at 5 months of age because both her biological mother and father were in and out of prison for charges related to felony burglary, drug related check fraud, forgery, assault, and drug use. Sarah was exposed to substance abuse and alcohol in utero, and exposed to a high degree of chaos, unpredictable parenting, violence, neglect, and personality-disordered parents prior to 6 months of age. By age 3 1/2, Sarah had been in 9 placements - including 7 foster care families. At this time, this very young child was referred to the Adoption & Family Support Program by the Child Protective Services Division with a host of behavioral and emotional difficulties associated with poor attachment, abuse, and trauma. Sarah had been unable to maintain safety and appropriate functioning in any of her multiple placements, and therefore, had no identified permanent place to call home.

Sarah is not unlike the majority of children referred to Adoption & Family Support - as a child in need of services, and as a child in need of a forever family. The Adoption and Family Support Program licenses families for *therapeutic* foster care (TFC) - a level of care that places many more demands and responsibilities on parents so that the child's permanency prognosis might increase...but also a level of care that is costly. TFC parents commit to expectations that include active treatment teaming and planning, on-going training, participation in consistent therapy with the child, attendance at parent group, and intensive introspection regarding their own family of origin issues with the help of a treatment coordinator who is in-home working with the family at a minimum of once a week. The work that therapeutic foster parents commit to doing is often thankless and overlooked. ...But it is these TFC parents - and these TFC services for parents, that allow children like Sarah to experience the depth of their pain, grief, abandonment, and loss - move into a sustaining relationship with their caregivers, and ultimately have a forever family and a place to call home. This is true for Sarah's story, and after two years of intense treatment parenting by her TFC parents, Sarah is now adopted.



As you can imagine, therapeutic foster care parents are difficult to recruit. Not only are the therapeutic demands placed on these families intense, but the reimbursement they receive from the state of Montana is minimal. These folks are not professionals, nor are they CFSD employees. Rather, they are simply well-intentioned individuals that give what they have, unconditionally, to hurting children. The room and board compensation is rarely a family's motivation to take in a high-needs foster child, but the budget we have for this resource is the indicator of how much our state values the priceless service of these foster families.

I am here today to ask you to please continue to recognize the value of Montana parents and professionals implementing necessary services for hurting children like Sarah as you assess areas to reduce this budget. If you recall, Sarah's biological parents were part of the corrections system - but because our state recognized the importance of investing in services for Sarah as a child - she will most likely break this cycle, and the future cost to Montana for her case has been significantly reduced. Please support the children and families of Montana and do not make any cuts in this area. Thank You.

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