

Hearing on Making a Difference for Families and Foster Youth

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON WORKER AND FAMILY SUPPORT

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

Wednesday, May 12, 2021

Serial No. 117-xx

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WITNESSES**Dr. William C. Bell**

President and CEO, Casey Family Programs

Kai Cotton

Lead Youth Navigator, YWCA

Weston Charles-Gallo

Advocate and former foster youth

Kevin Copeland, Program Coordinator, Visits to Mom, Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

Sharon Pierce

Immediate Past President and CEO, The Villages of Indiana



HOUSE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS
CHAIRMAN RICHARD E. NEAL

ADVISORY

FROM THE COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS SUBCOMMITTEE ON WORKER AND FAMILY SUPPORT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 5, 2021

No. WF-2

CONTACT: (202) 225-3625

Chair Davis Announces a Subcommittee Hearing on Making a Difference for Families and Foster Youth

House Ways and Means Worker and Family Support Subcommittee Chair Danny K. Davis announced today that the Subcommittee will hold a hearing, titled “Making a Difference for Families and Foster Youth,” on Wednesday, May 12, at 10:00 AM EST.

This hearing will take place remotely via Cisco Webex video conferencing. Members of the public may view the hearing via live webcast available at www.waysandmeans.house.gov. The webcast will not be available until the hearing starts.

In view of the limited time available to hear witnesses, oral testimony at this hearing will be from invited witnesses only. However, any individual or organization not scheduled for an oral appearance may submit a written statement for consideration by the Committee and for inclusion in the printed record of the hearing.

DETAILS FOR SUBMISSION OF WRITTEN COMMENTS:

Please Note: Any person(s) and/or organization(s) wishing to submit written comments for the hearing record must follow the appropriate link on the hearing page of the Committee website and complete the informational forms. From the Committee homepage, <http://waysandmeans.house.gov>, select “Hearings.” Select the hearing for which you would like to make a submission, and click on the link entitled, “Click here to provide a submission for the record.” Once you have followed the online instructions, submit all requested information. Please indicate in the subject line of your e-mail the title of the hearing for which you wish to submit testimony. ATTACH your submission as a Word document, in compliance with the formatting requirements listed below, **by the close of business on Wednesday, May 26, 2021**. For questions, or if you encounter technical problems, please call (202) 225-3625.

FORMATTING REQUIREMENTS:

The Committee relies on electronic submissions for printing the official hearing record. As always, submissions will be included in the record according to the discretion of the Committee. The Committee will not alter the content of your submission, but reserves the right to format it according to guidelines. Any submission provided to the Committee by a witness, any materials submitted for the printed record, and any written comments in response to a request for written comments must conform to the guidelines listed below. Any submission not in compliance with these guidelines will not be printed, but will be maintained in the Committee files for review and use by the Committee.

All submissions and supplementary materials must be submitted in a single document via email, provided in Word format and must not exceed a total of 10 pages. Witnesses and submitters are advised that the Committee relies on electronic submissions for printing the official hearing record.

All submissions must include a list of all clients, persons and/or organizations on whose behalf the witness appears. The name, company, address, telephone, and fax numbers of each witness must be included in the body of the email. Please exclude any personal identifiable information in the attached submission.

Failure to follow the formatting requirements may result in the exclusion of a submission. All submissions for the record are final.

The Committee seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you require special accommodations, please call (202) 225-3625 in advance of the event (four business days' notice is requested). Questions regarding special accommodation needs in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats) may be directed to the Committee as noted above.

Note: All Committee advisories and news releases are available at <http://www.waysandmeans.house.gov/>

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The subcommittee met, pursuant to call, at 10:00 a.m., via Webex, Hon. Danny Davis [chairman of the subcommittee] presiding.

*Chairman Davis. The subcommittee will come to order.

Thank you to the ranking member and the members of the subcommittee for joining me today to hold a hearing on families, foster care, and title IV-B of the Social Security Act.

You all know that foster care and kinship care are close to my heart. And I am glad that you have all joined me today to discuss families and foster care. As members of this subcommittee, we have the solemn responsibility to ensure that our child welfare system always acts in the best interests of children and families.

When we cannot keep children safe with their families, we owe our youth our very best effort to keep them in a permanent, supportive family setting, while preserving connection to -- in community.

This pandemic presented foster youth and struggling families with especially terrifying challenges. I am deeply proud of our work, with Ranking Member Walorski and our subcommittee colleagues, to enact legislation to provide critical short-term tools to help prevent hardship, homelessness, and despair for these youth and families.

But looking ahead, we still have much to do. This Congress, our subcommittee has need for critical funds to reauthorize laws that provide states with critical funds for family stabilization, reunification, adoption, better coordination with the courts, and grants to address family substance abuse challenges.

Also, we must work to ensure full implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act to realize our goal of a child welfare system truly focused on keeping families together.

We need to modernize the Chafee Independence Program, and take further action to

support grandparents and relatives who play such critical roles for youth whose parents are struggling.

In addition, I hope we can work together to advance a priority bill for our late friend and colleague, John Lewis. John's lifelong fight against discrimination included championing the Every Child Deserves a Family Act, a bill that would protect foster youth and foster parents from discrimination based on religion, marital status, and who they love.

Our clear duty is to ensure that each and every child in foster care finds a loving, affirming family.

We want to work to ensure the facilities working with foster youth protect their safety, so that foster youth like Cornelius Frederick do not die from aggressive restraints.

I want to ensure that grandmothers don't have to put their grandchildren in foster care because they can't afford a bigger apartment.

I want to take action to reduce the racial disparities in child welfare; to bolster the legal representation for parents, youth, and kinship caregivers; to help foster youth gain independence through driving; to promote meaningful relationships between foster youth and their incarcerated parents; to help expectant and parenting foster youth; and to use peer mentors to help parents and foster parents.

We have a lot to do, and I believe we have the commitment to change. We have excellent guides in current and former foster youth who have been so honest with us about their lives and what they need. Today we are privileged to be joined by two such youth, as well as by several adults who have devoted their lives to working on behalf of youth and families. I look forward to hearing from them, and then taking action together.

*Chairman Davis. And with that I will recognize the ranking member, Representative Walorski, for an opening statement.

*Mrs. Walorski. Thank you, Chairman Davis. I am grateful we have this hearing today on making a difference for families and foster youth. This is an important forum to discuss the challenges foster youth have faced during the pandemic, and how we can shore up gaps and better ensure America's children and families can thrive.

In 1988, President Reagan was the first president to proclaim May as National Foster Care Month. In his proclamation he stated, "National Foster Care Month presents an opportunity for all of us to reflect on the pressures facing families today, and on the need for increased efforts to ensure all children have the opportunity to live in healthy, loving homes." Thirty-three years later, I am thrilled that this subcommittee continues to carry that torch for those vulnerable children and families.

Mr. Chairman, I am proud of our work together last year to pass the Supporting Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act. That bipartisan legislation provided timely, common-sense solutions that are making a real difference in young people's lives today.

Each year, approximately 20,000 youths age out of foster care, when they go from 18 to 21. The pandemic left those foster youth particularly vulnerable, because they often do not have reliable adults and other sources of support in their lives. The bill we passed into law increased funding allowances for housing to make sure youth would not face homelessness. It also ensured they can maintain their enrolment in school, and have the technology they need to participate in online courses and continue their education. And it made sure youth would not age out of the foster care system during the pandemic, and provided increased access to funds for kinship navigator programs.

During this Congress several child welfare programs are set to expire. We have

the important responsibility to really look closely at these programs and the changes needed to make them work better for vulnerable youth and families.

One area that I think deserves our subcommittee's continued attention is kinship care. Relative caregiving is definitely the next-best alternative to maintaining the core family unit. Nationwide, 2.7 million grandparents are raising grandchildren, and about one-fifth have incomes that fall below the poverty line. The number of grandparents raising grandchildren is up 7 percent for 2009. Grandparents and other kin providers are often left on their own without much support.

Generations United's annual report on kinship care described in detail the challenges grandfamilies dealt with last year. I would like to ask unanimous support to insert the State of Grandfamilies 2010 Report, "Facing a Pandemic: Grandparents Living Together During COVID-19 and Thriving Beyond," into the record.

More broadly, the Family First Prevention Services Act, enacted in 2018, set the foundation for keeping more American families intact, and offering brighter futures for our communities. I believe it is crucial we continue to work with states on timely implementation of the important safeguards included in that legislation to help move forward toward the prevention-focused child welfare system.

We also need to take a serious look at the evidentiary standard for kinship care to see if its application makes sense when we know intuitively it is a perfect setting.

Today we are lucky to be joined by Sharon Pierce, who recently retired from her role as president and CEO of The Villages of Indiana after 30 years. The Villages is Indiana's largest not-for-profit child and family services agency, serving more than 3,100 vulnerable children and families each day. Throughout her career, Ms. Pierce has been an absolute rock star, working tirelessly in Indiana to see that Hoosier children find homes, where they will be nurtured and cared for.

Governor Holcomb recently honored her with the Wabash Award, which is the highest honor the governor of Indiana bestows to those who render distinguished service to the state. This was her second time receiving the award, having also received it from Governor Mitch Daniels. I am so thrilled to have Ms. Pierce with us today to talk about her work, and how changes at the Federal level could better support critical, community-based organizations like The Villages.

Ms. Pierce, thank you for joining us.

And as always, Mr. Chairman, I look forward to continuing this subcommittee's rich tradition of bipartisan work together -- to work together on child welfare in the coming months. And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you, Representative Walorski.

Without objection, all members' opening statements will be made a part of the record.

Now we have a distinguished panel of witnesses here with us today to discuss the subcommittee's jurisdiction around foster youth and families. They will help us to understand the success of the programs, and how we can make them even better, going forward.

First I would like to welcome Dr. William C. Bell, president and CEO of Casey Family Programs, a national foster care organization foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care, and improving support for children and families.

Next is Ms. Kai Cotton, a youth peer navigator at A Place 4 Me, which is a youth homelessness initiative at YWCA Greater Cleveland. Kai is the recipient of services from the John H. Chafee Transition to Adulthood Program.

Third, Mr. Weston Charles-Gallo joins us. He is a foster youth living in Liberty, Missouri with his dad and six siblings.

Next we have Mr. Kevin Copeland, coordinator of the Visits to Mom Program, part of prisoner and family ministry services at the Lutheran Social Services in Illinois.

Finally, we have Ms. Sharon Pierce, the immediate past president and CEO of The Villages of Indiana, an organization that provides services to at-risk youth and their families.

Each of your statements will be made part of the record in its entirety.

I would ask that you summarize your testimony in five minutes or less. To help you with that time there is a timing light at your table. When you have one minute left, the light will switch from green to yellow, and then finally to red when five minutes are up.

Dr. Bell, would you please begin?

STATEMENT OF WILLIAM C. BELL, PH.D., PRESIDENT AND CEO, CASEY
FAMILY PROGRAMS, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

*Mr. Bell. Good morning, Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski, and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to join you today for this important conversation about protecting our children, strengthening their families, and creating more supportive communities.

Case Family Programs has spent the last 55 years working to bring hope and uninhibited opportunity to families across this nation, regardless of the zip code or community where they live.

Families across this country are struggling with the overwhelming stress, setbacks, and heartache caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated impact on our shared economic prosperity.

This subcommittee has shown incredible leadership and vision in working to advance policies that will transform our nation's child protection system.

After decades of directing the vast majority of federal child welfare funding towards removing children from their homes, the historic passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 has focused critical resources on strengthening families through up-front prevention services, and prioritizing children growing up in safe, nurturing, family-based settings. Today's hearing continues this life-changing progress for children by focusing on how we can best continue this critical work of transformation and child protection.

Before I provide my recommendations, I want to highlight three guiding tenets for keeping our children safe, as you continue your work in this vital focus on child protection.

First, families are the foundation of every community, and every family should

have the ability to thrive with the support of a caring community. America's child welfare system must have the flexibility and adaptability to meet the needs of families, even when an unexpected crisis or disaster such as COVID-19 impacts our nation.

Second, our child protection system, while regarding safety as paramount in all its decision-making, must also value families, and ensure appropriate services and supports are provided to them. All too often, those who encounter the child welfare system results in unintentional harm and trauma for children and families (sic). This is especially true for Black, Native American, and Latinx children and families.

And then, third, foster care placements should be a temporary intervention for children at imminent risk of future harm, and should only be used when absolutely necessary. Children thrive with their families, so we should ensure that children in foster care are with kinship caregivers.

We should also work to safely reunify children with their parents in a timely way. And when that is not possible, we should work towards timely permanency through other pathways, including guardianship and adoption.

Since it became law in 2018, 12 states and 1 tribe have received approval of their Family First title IV-E prevention plans. An additional 12 states and 2 tribes have submitted Family First prevention plans, and are awaiting approval.

My written testimony provides details on our recommendations for the committee's consideration, based on our work directly with states, territories, and tribal nations. However, in the time I have remaining, I would like to highlight just three of those recommendations.

Number one, waivers -- waiving the state match for prevention services in Family First was a bold step towards transformation. This type of work takes time to develop and implement. So we suggest considering extending this provision through September of

2022. We also offer a similar recommendation to extend a waiver of the state match for the kinship navigator programs through 2022, given the immense potential of these programs to provide much-needed resources and support to relative caregivers during this time of crisis.

Number two, as you look to reauthorize the important programs in title IV-B, we ask that you look for opportunities to elevate and center the voice of those with direct experience in child welfare. Families are best equipped to identify what would be most helpful.

And then, number three, the needs of tribal nations must be elevated in our discussions. Their access to child welfare funding has been historically limited, which continues to contribute to inequity and disparate outcomes for children and families. We must create a world where all of our children have the chance to grow and thrive in safe and supportive environments, regardless of a child's neighborhood or zip code.

Strengthening families together, not breaking them apart, is key to helping families thrive, and ensuring the safety of children. I look forward to continuing to support the work of this subcommittee, and I am happy to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you, Dr. Bell.

Ms. Cotton, would you please begin?

STATEMENT OF KAI COTTON, LEAD YOUTH NAVIGATOR, YWCA,
CLEVELAND HEIGHTS, OHIO

*Ms. Cotton. Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski, and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify at today's hearing. Thank you also for your leadership in sponsoring the Supporting Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act. This legislation is making a big difference in the lives of young people in Ohio and across the country. I hope that Congress will continue to support these policies and investments.

My name is Kai Cotton, and I am from Cleveland, Ohio, and currently I work as lead youth navigator with A Place 4 Me, a systems change initiative to end and prevent youth homelessness in Cuyahoga County. I am 24 years old, and a proud mother of my 2-year-old, who you just heard, and a graduate of John Adams High School, and a dedicated advocate on behalf of youth in foster care.

A Place 4 Me is housed by the YWCA Greater Cleveland, which is an organization that strives to eliminate racism and empower women. A Place 4 Me is also a partner to the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, where we strive to advance policies and practices to meet the needs of youth transitioning from foster care into adulthood.

I am uniquely qualified for my position as the youth navigator, and as a Jim Casey Young Fellow on the strength of my own lived experience of aging out of foster care. My first encounter with A Place 4 Me was when I was 19 years old, and I participated in a financial literacy and matched savings program crafted for teens and young adults who have experienced foster care. With the help of Opportunity Passport and my hard work, over the course of five years this program has not only helped me purchase one car, but two.

Cars are something especially important in my life, as they were a home to me when I sunk into homelessness two years after aging out of foster care. The legislation sponsored last year by Chairman Davis and Ranking Member Walorski to prevent youth aging out is so vital because it gave young people the peace of mind to know that they will not age out of foster care into homelessness during an international crisis.

As our country begins to recover from the pandemic, I think it would be exceptional for Congress to enforce a policy around the extension of foster care to age 21 in all states. No teenager or young adult should still -- still in their transitional brain space, should age out to homelessness, ever. It is not something that we should prevent in a pandemic, it is something that we should try to avoid at all costs.

I speak from personal experience. Soon after I aged out of foster care at 18, I felt like I was drowning in all the struggles of adulthood with no concrete support to rely on. I spent months without electricity because I couldn't afford it, and without power. Some days I had to give up buying dinner to afford my bus ride to work the next day. At the time I didn't have adults I could trust in my life. So when I ultimately ended up homeless, I found myself in many uncomfortable situations.

Today I see a difference in the system that released custody of me. I see the system trying to evolve, not only into a temporary carrier of our youth, but a bridge for us into adulthood.

I want to focus on this word, "bridges." I invite you to take a moment to picture a bridge that you have crossed in your lifetime. Think about how you trusted this bridge to carry you safely from one side to another, protecting you from the deep waters below, leading you to your destination. Young people who are leaving foster care need that same trusted bridge as they transition from foster care into adulthood. Consider the unfortunate series of events that led us into foster care.

You created this bridge when you enacted the Supporting Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act. This legislation provides essential transition services that youth need, and makes it available to them through age 26. It is my hope that Congress continues to maintain and build on this important policy.

Essential supports and services that should be available on an ongoing basis to help us reach safely and successfully to adulthood include stable housing, financial assistance, and economic support. Ongoing transitional services to age 26, which are often referred to as Chafee funds, support informing healthy connections with family and community, coaching and peer support, and peer navigation. And of course, I strongly recommend that policies require agencies to engage young people as partners. We have our own unique experience based on our experience, and giving us a seat at the table is a win-win situation.

Thank you for inviting me to today's hearing to share my point of view. I hope that Congress will act to build the kind of bridge that I spoke about today. I would love to invite every young person who has experienced foster care to walk on this bridge. If time permits, I would be glad to answer any questions about my testimony, and share more about A Place 4 Me.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you, Ms. Cotton.

Now Mr. Charles-Gallo, would you please begin?

STATEMENT OF WESTON CHARLES-GALLO, ADVOCATE AND FORMER
FOSTER YOUTH, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

*Mr. Charles-Gallo. Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify. My name is Weston Charles-Gallo, and I am from Liberty, Missouri. I am 21 years old, and this is my foster care story.

Before I met my two dads, I lived the life of a chameleon, masking who I am, and trying to fit in where I never belonged.

I came from a biological family that was broken from the start. My father was an alcoholic and a drug addict when he was home. Most of the time he was abusive. My mother was a victim of domestic violence, and was scared to ever speak her mind.

When my father -- my father was a deacon of the church, and my mom was a member of the choir. I was taught that being gay doesn't fit with worshiping God. I knew that I was gay at a really young age. But because my family deemed it an abomination, I couldn't live as my authentic self.

I will never be able to forget my word -- my father's words loudly spoken, "If my son turns out to be gay, I will not only beat the gay out of him, but throw him out of my house." Those words will haunt me for a lifetime.

At age 14 I was told I was put in foster care because of my parents' inability to accept and support my sexual orientation, because of parental neglect, and an overall hostile home environment. It really made me feel like I wasn't enough, as if the dark thoughts in my head were true. I felt unloved, and that all became reality.

When I entered foster care, I was open about my sexuality. That later became a concern in finding a placement. Placements in my rural community that were open and affirming to gay, biracial teenagers were almost non-existent. I was told by my social

worker that different placements fell through because I might turn the other children gay, or be a predator. No child should ever hear those words. This just broke my heart, because all I wanted was a family that loved me for me.

So, while sitting in a residential facility under an emergency shelter status, I was on the cusp of ending my life all together. Through many hospital visits because of my suicidal attempts, bouncing from foster home to foster home, stays in residential care, living in an --

[Audio malfunction.]

*Mr. Charles-Gallo. -- I gave up my childhood, and learned to be an adult at the age of 14.

Even as I felt nothing could go right, when I was 15 I received the amazing news that my impermanence in foster care was a thing of the past. I was going to be adopted. I have since learned, unfortunately, that many, many LGBTQ-plus foster youth never get that news.

I was placed with my two dads and six siblings. My dads showed me what it was like to witness a true marriage and live a normal life, expressing the meaning of family. Before I lived with them, I never pictured myself marrying someone, or even having a family. But they proved to me that anything is possible. And without them in my life, constantly supporting and encouraging me, I don't know where I would be, or even if I would be alive today.

I finally found a home where I could live my authentic self.

In the conversation about same-sex couples fostering and adopting, the mission to give children in need safety, stability, and love is often absent. I urge committee members to focus on that mission, not on the personal beliefs of adults. If it wasn't for my two dads taking a chance on me, and helping me embrace my sexual orientation, the color of my

skin, and who Weston is, I wouldn't be here to share my story.

When a child enters the foster care system, they just want to find a family that loves them unconditionally, and supports them continuously. Why keep qualified parents from giving children the lives they deserve, but never imagined? Because that is exactly what my fathers did for me. We should find more loving families like my dads' that can be affirming of all kids in care.

I want to ask all policymakers, foster care parents, and social workers to take the time to put yourself in our shoes, and think about what you wanted as a child. LGBTQ-plus youth aren't going anywhere. We are here, and we are asking to be heard and loved for who we are.

I urge the committee to support the bipartisan John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act. This Act will end discrimination in the child welfare system, and provide affirming services to every LGBTQ-plus child in care. All foster youth should have affirming families. Thank you.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you, Mr. Charles-Gallo.

And now, Mr. Copeland, would you please begin?

STATEMENT OF KEVIN COPELAND, PROGRAM COORDINATOR, VISITS TO
MOM, LUTHERAN SOCIAL SERVICES OF ILLINOIS CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

*Mr. Copeland. Thank you, Chairman Davis. Good morning, everyone. My name is Kevin Copeland, and I am the coordinator of the Visits to Mom Program, which is part of the prisoner family ministry at Lutheran Social Services in Illinois.

LSSI is one of the largest statewide providers of human services in Illinois. Since 1981, LSSI has provided prisoner and family ministry programming, with the goal to connect individuals and families impacted by incarcerated -- incarceration to necessary services. Our programs include, but are not limited to, reentry services, case management services, as well.

To help children maintain connections with incarcerated parents, we offer Visits to Moms Program and Storybook Project. Storybook Project enables incarcerated parents to record themselves reading a book to the children. But the Visits to Moms Program provides free bus transportation to children whose mothers are incarcerated and are too far away to visit. Trips are scheduled quarterly, and typically we are serving right now the Chicago's South Side and the West Side communities.

I am privileged to witness children's visits with their moms, from boarding the bus from Chicago to arriving approximately three hours later, and seeing the kids' eyes light up when they see their mom. It is emotional. The act of a mom being able to interact and braid her daughter's hair, or just cuddle with them and interact with them, is therapeutic. It gives these moms renewed purpose that can be hard to find in prison. The visits help to maintain meaningful relationships between children and their incarcerated parents. We know that this translates to positive outcomes upon their release.

For the children, it helps to maintain and nurture a parental connection that is key to

social and emotional health. Children are often collateral victims of a parent's incarceration. Fortunately, research shows that intervening in the lives of incarcerated parents and their children to preserve and strengthen positive family connections can yield social benefits. This includes reduced recidivism, less inter-generational criminal justice system involvement, and promotion of healthy child development.

These programs are critical for the parents to see beyond their life in prison, for the children to know that they are loved by their parent, even if they cannot be present with them, and to build healthy and strong community. The strongest testimony is from people impacted by the program, and I would like to share with you some words from one of the guardians.

She wrote, "Dear Mr. Copeland and LSSI, thank you for making possible the many trips for the children to visit their mom and spend quality time with her. The time that my children spend with their mother is precious. My girls look forward to every visit. That wouldn't be possible without you. Thank you for helping children to get to know their mothers, giving them a visual understanding why she cannot be home right now at this time. Thank you for the smiles I see when they see and touch their mother."

So, on behalf of the parents and the children impacted by the Visits to Mom program, I want to thank you all for allowing me to testify today, and the programs that make a difference for the families that foster youth. Thank you.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you, Mr. Copeland.

And now, Ms. Pierce, would you please begin?

STATEMENT OF SHARON PIERCE, IMMEDIATE PAST PRESIDENT AND CEO,
THE VILLAGES OF INDIANA, ZIONSVILLE, INDIANA

*Ms. Pierce. Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski, and subcommittee members, I can't begin to tell you what an honor it is to provide testimony for you this morning. The outstanding bipartisan leadership which you all are exemplifying on behalf of our nation's most vulnerable children and their families is exactly what they need and deserve.

It is also reflective of those of us who are privileged to have been called to child and family services, and how we must partner with one another. We, too, must work on their behalf, demonstrating and actualizing the power of partnerships that we can truly create positive outcomes for those we are honored to serve, building bridges of communication and collective impact between child welfare, mental health, education, judicial, faith-based, and community organizations.

I retired on April 18th, after serving 30 years as the president and CEO of The Villages of Indiana. Prior to that was Indiana State Child Welfare Director, and also served many years as the regional downstate director of Children's Home and Aid Society of Illinois. Like each of you here, I value the entire continuum of child and family services, from the vital need for primary prevention, resources, information, and supports for every parent to the need that, sadly, we will always have in the country for more intensive care, therapeutic foster care, wraparound mental health services, and quality residential programs.

Just as in the case in the health care arena, we always need a strong, high-quality array of services, from that least restrictive, the drop-in urgent care centers, to the trauma centers, which are vital to sustain life in a critical care situation. High-quality, culturally-

respectful evidence-informed services are essential at every level of our state and national child welfare systems. It is the only way we can possibly meet each and every child and family in need where they are.

As Indiana's largest therapeutic foster provider, The Village serves between 750 and 800 different foster children each year, and 89 percent of them annually are in only one Villages foster home. That means that 9 out of 10 of every foster children (sic) The Villages is privileged to serve have the stability of one nurturing foster family.

My sense is that you, like me, want to salute and thank every foster parent in our country who have opened their hearts, their homes, and their lives to create a brighter future for abused and neglected children during this annual Foster Parent Appreciation Month.

How do we sustain, year after year, such an unprecedented stability and permanency rate? Just like any strong, committed, continual team, we have to have that great bench strength. So we are constantly recruiting quality foster families. Only then can we meet each child's unique needs ethnically, geographically, educationally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Meet little Arianna. She was never supposed to have been able to walk, talk, or see, but she has defied all those odds, thanks to her foster dad, who was a respiratory therapist, and her foster mom, a nurse. They regulate her oxygen every single night, and along with their biological children, they have now become Arianna's forever family. The flexible resources that you all helped provide agencies like The Villages through the COVID CARES Act have been invaluable. Arianna needed a portable oxygen tank so she could crawl, and then slowly learned to walk. You helped us provide that.

Equally heroic are the kinship caregivers in Indiana: 59,000 children are being raised by kin with no parent present, and 146,900 children are living in homes where a non-

parental relative is the head of their household. These twins, Jada and Jayden, are the 15th and 16th relative children raised by Miss Anita, one of The Village's many kinship caregivers. They both have perfect attendance in school, and Jada received the principal's award.

Miss Sharvonne, that you see here, has put her single life completely on hold for the last seven years because her mother in New York was having health problems. And so she brought her brother, Joseph, to Indianapolis to live with her. He is now completing high school, has a job, and just got his driver's license.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the selfless roles of foster, adoptive, and kinship caregivers more challenging than ever. But thanks to your collective support and, we hope, the support of this legislation, we have been able to provide porch pantries with vital food, cleaning supplies to keep each household safe, diapers for the 45 percent of Indiana foster children who are 4 and under, an iPad, stronger Internet connections, and virtual tutoring for school-aged children.

Not all of us can be a foster, adoptive, or kinship caregiver, but we can all support their selfless commitment to our nation's most vulnerable children. And that is what you all are doing, just that: investing in these children, the only future our nation has. Thank you so much.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you, Ms. Pierce, and now we will proceed, under the five-minute rule, with questions for the witnesses. And I will begin by recognizing myself.

Mr. Copeland, I started taking children to see their incarcerated fathers after I spoke with a person who worked for Lutheran Family Services, and I asked her about fathers. Can you talk more about the impact that these trips have on the children and parents who participate, and the difficulties and challenges that we currently face to try and keep families connected, especially when one or sometimes both are incarcerated?

*Mr. Copeland. Absolutely. Thank you. Yes, it is a challenge. We have seen that, obviously, when a parent is incarcerated, typically, their grandmother or some family member ends up taking care of that child. And so -- not always does their grandparents, just being honest, feel like this is something that they signed up for. So it is a challenge for me, as a coordinator, to encourage those parents and grandparents, or even foster parents, to realize the importance and the impact that the relationship -- mending the relationship, and reunifying that connection is so important to -- with the children.

So we have seen the outcome. We have seen where the parent that is incarcerated has realized that this is something that they want to have in their life, and the importance of having their children in their lives, so they kind of get on the straight and narrow when they get released out of prison, and make sure that they don't go back.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you very much. And I just want to thank you and Lutheran Family Services for the work that you do.

Dr. Bell, we know that the best way to keep children safe and help families thrive is through services and supports that are responsive to what they tell us they need. This committee's efforts to provide resources through the Family First Prevention and Services Act is a significant downpayment on our efforts to shift the imbalance we have in paying

for foster care instead of family support.

And if we consider the critical funding in title VI-B, what are your thoughts on what we should prioritize or focus on to address unmet needs?

*Mr. Bell. Thank you, Chairman Davis. You know, I would just begin with what we have seen work, even in -- when we were considering Family First, and that is engaging the voices of those who have been impacted by the system.

And I am thankful to see that you have done that in this hearing, and that you continue to elevate those voices, because people who have gone through the challenges that we are trying to resolve have the most information that we can possibly find about what works, what we need to fix, what we need to change, and what needs to be added that hasn't been considered before.

But also, I think that, when you are looking at IV-B, what I would suggest is that we need to encourage states, incentivize states with the funding, to make sure that all of our states are working in this same way, that they are elevating the voices of those who have been impacted by their services, and being willing to hear when people say something didn't work for them, or offer alternatives that might be considered.

Secondly, I would say that the Federal Government needs to find a way to provide the kind of technical assistance that is necessary in order to make this approach to developing programs institutionalized across the country.

And then finally, I would say we have got to consider funding levels. I am grateful for the long history of your commitment to prevention and supporting families and communities. But when we think about the amount of resources that are available -- and I will just give an example.

So in 2016 title VI-B1, a 179 tribes split \$6.4 million. And for title IV-B2, 130 tribes split \$10.3 million. Now, that might sound like significant contributions, but when

you do the math, 179 tribes and 6.4 million works out to about \$35,000 a tribe; 130 tribes and 10.3 million works out to about \$79,000 per tribe. So I think we have really got to consider the resources that are necessary in order to meet the needs of the populations that we are really trying to impact.

And then lastly, I would just suggest that we consider supporting courts. We need to increase the level of automation in courts, and the courts' ability to be flexible, to continue their vital role in making sure that children and families can achieve permanency. We have seen across the country, during the pandemic, where a number of courts had to close down, and they were not able to continue the hearings, which means delays in children being able to be with their parents, and parents getting resolutions in their cases. There are a number of automated courts around the country that I think we can learn from, and I think those are areas that we need to take a focus on, and -- as we move forward.

*Chairman Davis. Weston, let me thank you for sharing your story. And I am so delighted that the end, or the outcome, or the ultimate experiences that you have had turned out to be a loving family, supportive, as an example of --

[Audio malfunction.]

*Chairman Davis. Based on your experiences, what are your thoughts on how to improve foster care for LGBTQ children?

*Mr. Charles-Gallo. Yes, I want to first thank you all for listening to my story.

One of the things that I would really have helped -- that would have really helped me would have been being able to be connected to LGBTQ-plus youth, or youth organizations, so I didn't feel so alone. You know, living in Brunswick, Missouri, which was a town of 859 people, I was the only Black gay person in my community. So I felt like I had no one who really understood who I was.

You know, I also strongly believe that there needs to be more comprehensive

training when it comes to sexual orientation and gender identity. And I think that that would have really improved my experience during my time in the system. You know, this training should be provided to all adults who are working with foster care youth.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you –

*Mr. Charles-Gallo. Also –

*Chairman Davis. No, go right ahead.

*Mr. Charles-Gallo. And also, as I had mentioned earlier, you know, in my testimony, when I entered care I was open about my sexuality. You know, that kind of hindered me finding an affirming placement. Had my foster parents been trained on sexual orientation and gender identity, they would have had a better way of understanding who I am. I wouldn't have been turned away from homes based on, you know, harmful or untrue stigmas that were wrapping around, you know, gay people.

The John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act requires training for all adults in the child welfare system.

I really just want to end by thanking you, Chairman Davis, for leading this bill after the passing of John Lewis. You really give me hope. Thank you so much.

*Chairman Davis. Well, thank you so very much. And I, like you, look forward to passing the John Lewis Every Child Needs a Family Act (sic), and we are going to do everything in our power to try and make sure that we do that.

Ms. Cotton, let me ask you quickly, and appreciate the work that you have done, the work that you do. Would it help foster youth if Congress, somehow or another, was able to help cover the cost of getting a driver's license, or paying for car insurance, or even owning a car for young people?

*Ms. Cotton. Thank you, Chairman Davis, for asking this question.

Driving is something that is really important to all young adults, not just foster

youth. I think it is just such a great liberty on its own. I do believe that young people that age out of foster care should be supported in obtaining their driver's license, insurance, and a car. I know there are so many peers of mine, who are older than I am, going into their 30s who don't know how to drive because they never had the opportunity to learn. And this can pose as a great barrier, as we become adults, just as far as access to opportunities in the community.

So I do think it is very important that that would be provided to us.

*Chairman Davis. And let me ask finally, what about parenting skills?

I have always maintained that there are many young people, no matter who they are, who could use help in developing and understanding parenting, and how it could be carried out. Would that also provide any help, you think?

*Ms. Cotton. Definitely, 100 percent. For expecting youth, and youth that are currently parenting that are in foster care and aging out of foster care, I just 100 percent believe that services can be enhanced, because this population is disconnected from their natural families, and they are really vulnerable to making mistakes as a parent, in general.

In order to prevent generational system involvement, and youth aging out into poverty, and just making sure that the system is preparing these youth to be good parents is so vital.

*Chairman Davis. Well, thank you so much, and I want to thank all of the witnesses for your answers. And now it is my pleasure to recognize Ranking Member Walorski for five minutes.

*Mrs. Walorski. Thank you so much to all of you that are here for this hearing, we appreciate it.

Sharon, it is good to see you. I am so glad you are here, and so thankful for what you have done in the State of Indiana. I just have a few questions, Ms. Pierce.

Number one, our bipartisan legislation waives the Family First evidence stand for kinship care for the duration of the pandemic, and allowed Federal reimbursement at 100 percent. Kinship models have had difficulty finding a way to fit the evidence standard for the Family First clearinghouse, but need to be recognized as an essential component of the continuum of care for our nation's foster youth.

Ms. Pierce, what approach does The Villages take to support kinship caregivers?

And can you talk to us briefly about how the committee can further emphasize that family preservation, and -- being optimal, and what the next best option is, relative to caregiving?

*Ms. Pierce. Absolutely. And if I was asked what do we most need in the community, those of us who are providing the services, I would --

*Mrs. Walorski. Right --

*Ms. Pierce. I would say, number one, the flexibility of funding, which, even as director of child welfare with the State of Indiana, that is really a hallmark of title IV-B. It has got great flexibility, and that must continue.

But also, kind of that balance between evidence-based and reality-based, Congresswoman Walorski. And reality-based means relationally-based, too. All of our social work data indicates that relationships are critical in developing trust, and creating brighter futures, and helping children who have had childhood trauma heal. And we know they can heal. We can mitigate that childhood trauma. So you were exactly right: allowing for the flexibility that -- what the research tells us, that if a child can be in their own family circle, that is greater stability than anywhere else, because the personal connections are there.

So continuing that waiver, if you will, and then certainly we do focus group after focus group with our kinship caregivers.

And I applaud you and Chairman Davis in the way that you are bringing in the lived experience voices. Those are the voices we all have to listen to.

Repeatedly, they say the top two things they most need to be successful in caring for the children who come to their care are, number one, those resources to help, you know, get that larger apartment, as Chairman Davis indicated earlier, so that they can care for not just two of their grandchildren, but all four.

And also, child care –

*Mrs. Walorski. Let me stop you there, Sharon, just because I want to ask you one other question.

You highlighted that The Villages serve between 750 and 800 different foster children each year, and 89 percent of them annually only spend in a single foster home (sic). One issue I hear over and over again is about our children being forced to change placements multiple times in a single year. So when children are removed from their homes and then bounced from foster care placement to placement, we exacerbate their trauma.

What are the features of The Village's program that allow you to keep 9 out of every 10 foster children you work with in a stable home of a single, nurturing foster family? What is the key there?

*Ms. Pierce. It truly is constantly recruiting, just like a great ball team needs a strong bench strength, if we want to match children ethnically, geographically, based on sexual orientation, as Weston so beautifully stated, we have to have that strong, diverse cadre of foster parents. So The Villages is on a treadmill, constantly recruiting and training and screening and supporting foster families.

Our foster parents know we have their back 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, so it is not just recruiting, it is retaining them. And that is why I love the community action that

you all are encouraging, that not everybody can be a foster parent or a kinship caregiver, but we can certainly support them with meeting some of their needs.

And so that is really our key, is making sure we have that vast choice, so that if a young woman who has been violated by a male needs, you know, a female single caregiver, African-American, we have got choices, and can keep her in her own school district until we can find a family member who can care for that child, which is always then the highest priority.

*Mrs. Walorski. Again, thanks so much for your service to the State of Indiana, and thanks for sharing your wealth of wisdom with us today.

And with that, Mr. Chairman --

*Ms. Pierce. And thank you all again for the bipartisan leadership. It means the world to those of us out here in the trenches.

*Mrs. Walorski. Thanks so much --

*Chairman Davis. Thanks very --

*Mrs. Walorski. I yield back, Mr. --

*Chairman Davis. The gentlelady's time has expired. The chair now recognizes Representative Chu for five minutes.

[Pause.]

*Ms. Chu. -- Los Angeles County -- oh, well, thank you, Mr. Charles-Gallo, for your bravery in sharing your story with us today.

In Los Angeles County, where my district is, nearly one in five foster youth identify as LGBTQ. When I was in the California Assembly, I read a report on the horrors experienced by LGBT youth in the foster system. And that is why I introduced the Foster Youth Anti-Discrimination Act, which went into effect in 2004, and was the first law of its kind in the U.S. to explicitly include protections for LGBTQ youth and adults involved

with the foster care system.

That is why, when I came to Congress, of course, I was a strong supporter of the Every Child Deserves Family Act, which would prohibit federally-funded child welfare service providers from turning away same-sex couples from adopting. And I certainly hope that this committee will approve this legislation, as it moves forward.

So, Mr. Charles-Gallo, given your experience, why would it be a problem to allow child welfare providers to turn away same-sex couples, like your dads, when they apply to be foster parents?

How would it have impacted you to not have foster parents like your dads to be able to participate in the foster care system?

*Mr. Charles-Gallo. Yes, thank you. So essentially, on the verge of suicide, my two dads really saved my life. If my dads were turned away, I would not, you know, be able to be here to talk to you today and share my story.

So turning away same-sex couples from fostering and adopting harms all children in the child welfare system. The same-sex couple is seven times more likely to foster and adopt than opposite-sex couples. Turning away, you know, my dads and other couples like them would mean that there are fewer families that are available to actually foster and adopt. Same-sex couples are, you know, also more likely to foster and adopt older kids like me, you know, large sibling groups, and children, you know, with disabilities. So turning away same-sex couples would definitely mean there are fewer affirming families for, you know, kids like me, who are LGBTQ-plus.

And I really want to say please remember that foster children do not get to choose which agency serves us. You know, all agencies must affirm that LGBTQ-plus youth -- LGBTQ-plus adults undermines that. And I really want to urge you to consider that all lives, futures, and outcomes are more important than the personal beliefs of adults.

You know, we are not asking for anyone to change their, you know, their beliefs, but we are really just wanting to be affirmed and loved for who we are. And I truly believe that faith-based agencies can live their faith and also provide equal treatment to LGBTQ-plus families, foster parents, and children.

You know, many agencies have made this journey. You know, Bethany Christian Services just changed their policies to allow same-sex couples to foster and adopt. So why can't all agencies do this?

I think nondiscrimination is the foundation for LGBTQ-plus kids, and, essentially, I think that nondiscrimination saves lives. Thank you so much.

*Ms. Chu. Well, thank you for your eloquent words. I really appreciate it.

Dr. Bell, I come from LA County, which -- I indicated they are struggling with the implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act, as a result of the pandemic.

Dr. Bell, in your experience with implementing the new changes, what flexibilities might be offered to assist states in implementation, as they are looking to recover from COVID-19?

Do you think measures like additional time to comply with the Family First requirements would be helpful, or additional funding to provide relief for those looking to implement the new law?

*Mr. Bell. So thank you for your question, Congresswoman.

You know, there are a number of states that have not yet submitted, there are a number of states that have submitted and still waiting. We have looked at what some of the challenges are that they have identified, and what are some of the opportunities to work within the context of those challenges. Challenges have been laid out as the challenges with meeting the evidence-based standard, the clearinghouse not having sufficient evidence-based programming to deal with families of color, the length of time the

submission and review process that they have to go through, the delays caused by the pandemic, and the time that is required to actually build an array of preventive services.

For a system that has focused so much on foster care, building prevention takes time to get that done. And so what we recommend, as I said earlier in my testimony, waiving the match requirements for both the prevention services, as well as the kinship navigator programs, streamlining the process.

You know, one of the things about evidence-based programming, we started with this new program, creating a new clearinghouse. Well, the California Clearinghouse has been around for many, many years, and has been long accepted as a viable option for looking for evidence-based programming. And we are not saying pit one against the other. We are saying expand the clearinghouse capacity by focusing on some that have already been there, as opposed to creating a brand new clearinghouse. And we think that would be helpful in this process, as well.

And we also think that it is an opportunity to encourage collaboration among states, so that those states that have actually gotten approved plans, what -- we can learn from them in order to help those states that have not yet submitted.

So I think that is a combination of actions that can be looked at in order to make sure that all states get their plans in and get them approved.

*Ms. Chu. Thank you, I yield back.

*Chairman Davis. I thank the gentlelady. Her time has expired. And the chair is now pleased to recognize for five minutes Dr. Wenstrup.

*Mr. Wenstrup. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I want to thank all of our members here today that are testifying. I appreciate it greatly.

You know, in Ohio, foster care has really taken on a whole new meaning in some ways because the opioid and substance abuse epidemic really stresses the state foster

system. My district stretches from Cincinnati, Ohio to Portsmouth, Ohio. And if you have ever read the book Dreamland, and understand the opioid crisis, that is my district on the cover. It has really been a problem.

And last year, prior to COVID-19, the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services created an emergency response fund to help child welfare agencies tackle this influx in needed services due to substance abuse. So I am glad we are having this hearing today, and I look forward to tackling foster care issues on a bipartisan basis.

So in our conversations about improving our foster care systems, I think it is important that adoption be part of the conversation. And while much of the adoption process is overseen by the states, HHS and this subcommittee have jurisdiction over this issue, as well.

Ms. Pierce, I am touched by the story of the little girl who was ultimately adopted from foster care. I can tell those here on the panel today and other members with me that I know that there is at least four members of the Ways and Means Committee that have adopted children. Ms. Pierce, there are many families interested in providing a permanent, loving, and safe home for foster children. But sometimes they get discouraged, I think, by bureaucratic inefficiencies. Are there additional flexibilities that we may need to streamline so that this process can carry out, while still maintaining safety for these children?

And having adopted, I understand all that you need to go through, but there are -- are there some flexibilities we might need to engage?

*Ms. Pierce. You know, that is a great question. And really, we have learned a great deal through the pandemic, that we can blend a hybrid of face-to-face training, understanding, getting-to-know-one-another home studies, with virtual. And that has actually, you know, limited some of those bureaucratic barriers that are there.

For example, as a statewide agency, we can have a family in Fort Wayne, Indiana, that is interested in adopting, but they can't go to the first training night there, but can attend virtually to the first training in the South Bend area, in Congressman Walorski's area. So we have found some real positives in being able to move families forward.

The Villages, too, has just been tapped by the Dave Thomas Foundation for adoption -- and I know you are very familiar with their work -- to take that program to scale in Indiana, working with those harder-to-place children, nine years of age and up, sibling groups, special needs. So we are very excited about that.

But certainly, I think freeing up some of those longstanding background check challenges that really don't reflect where an adoptive or foster family is today -- perhaps someone had a misdemeanor when they were 16 or 18 years of age that is still on their record -- and making sure that we aren't adding to the barriers that Weston, I think, has articulated so well that are there for children, and opening the doors for those families who can safely and, with training, and with support from agencies like ours, be that forever family for children.

*Mr. Wenstrup. Yes, and this next question kind of touches on some of the things you just mentioned, but, you know, understanding there is additional difficulties for older foster youth to get adopted, are there additional supports that we may need to put forward to ensure a successful transition to adoption for some of our older children that are in foster care?

And I was also curious, too, as a soldier, I know that there are programs that may reach out for those in foster care that may desire to join the military, or at least become aware of what some of their opportunities are. And I wonder if you could comment on both of those.

*Ms. Pierce. Absolutely. You know, number one, we certainly have that

relationship with our military programs. We have a great Reserve program, Air National Guard and National Reserve program, that many of our foster youth are involved in. So making sure that bridge that Kai described so well, from childhood to adulthood, is in place, both while a child is in foster care, and while we are looking, as partners, for that forever family for that child is really critical.

I think also, you know, doing what we can to elevate the role that foster and adoptive parents play in our country -- unfortunately, that one horrific situation is always what grabs the headlines, rather than, you know, that foster parent that, for 30 years, has been caring for children. And so I think, collectively, we want to elevate the work, you know, the heart-and-soul work that foster and adoptive parents are doing each and every day, so that even our youth realize these are folks that really want to champion their futures and create brighter futures for them.

But I think both of those are possible, and just take some intentionality on our part, both in the public and private sector. You know, having been a director of child welfare, I love advocating for the public-private partnership. That is where successful outcomes come for our children.

*Mr. Wenstrup. Thank you very much. I yield back.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you, sir. And the chair now is pleased to recognize for five minutes Representative Moore.

*Ms. Moore. Well, thank you so very, very much, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Walorski. I just want to commend both of you for leaning into this topic of foster care, which was really a main priority for my joining this subcommittee -- buoyed by Karen Bass, and encouraged to lean into this topic.

I guess I am really interested in the testimony Kai -- I thought immediately that word, "Kai," in German, means keeper of the keys. And I guess I am wondering about

your experience at age 18, as compared to other sort of middle-class young people who can rely on parents to continue to provide medical care for them while they go off to college, or to a two-year -- a technical college, or they work and they are still at home at age 18, that -- just things that they take for granted, like health care, like providing a shelter for yourself.

And I am just wondering, I just want to get into the discussion of whether or not, Mr. Chairman, Madam Ranking Member, we think that, realistically, 18 years of age is a realistic age for us to expect youth to age out of foster care. I know that there is a state option to go until 21, but I just wanted Kai to just sort of elaborate a little bit on her experience at age 18.

And I just want to say Kai and Weston represent, I think, a real minority of youth in foster care. This is a really a dangerous journey for someone to try to get to be 18 to adulthood with no other adult support.

And I just want you to lean into that a little bit with me, Kai.

*Ms. Cotton. Yes, thank you so much for telling me the definition of my name. I didn't know that. But also asking this question.

*Ms. Moore. Keeper of the keys.

*Ms. Cotton. When I was 18 years old, you know, I was very resilient. There were times where I thought that I was able to be an adult and do everything on my own. I also had a very hard time trusting adults because of my history in care. I had unreliable and, you know, foster parents who did neglect me in certain ways, and then just a change of social workers constantly. So going into 18, there was a period of time where I didn't open myself up to support, which did contribute a little bit to my downfall. But overall, I didn't have the resources that I needed. I didn't have the independent skills that I needed, or the education that I needed to survive on my own.

And then I just want to highlight just the brain science that, you know, has come

into play in the past few years. Adolescent brain science shows us that the brain doesn't fully develop until the age of 26. So when I highlighted ongoing services, I really wanted to specify ongoing services until the age of 26, because we need to make room to have mistakes, and take risks, and just figure life out.

So I really think that just the peer navigation, the transition of support, access to affordable housing, room to make mistakes, flexible financial assistance, all of those things are going to be really, really just important in the overall success and long-term success of people who have aged out of care.

*Ms. Moore. Thank you so much for that, Kai. And Mr. Chairman and Madam Ranking Member, I just want to commend her testimony to you, and just, you know, put a - - just elucidate her testimony, because when we really think about it, I mean, none of us at age 18 -- I am now 70 -- we cannot really point to having been in her or Weston's situation.

I mean, there were parents, there were grandparents, there were ministers and people in the church. There was health care, stuff that we took for granted, still on somebody's account. Going off to college, I mean, you know, you talk about having gotten two cars. You know, a lot of us inherited dad's old car, you know, when he got a new one. And our biggest problem was worried about where -- you know, keeping it up and getting the oil changed.

Dr. Bell, you had a very disturbing testimony that I would like you to expand on a little bit, in terms of Native Americans and the kind of support we give those foster youth. Could you please -- I don't know whether I missed something, but you said something like \$35,000. What course of period is this?

Can you just lean into the dire situation of Native youth for me a minute?

*Mr. Bell. So the point that you are raising is when I spoke about how the current distribution of support from title IV-B is then divided amongst a number of tribes, and our

long history of having tribes not have direct access to the Federal resources.

And so, for title IV-E, the majority of tribes have to get their support through title IV-E by going to the state, not by going directly to the Federal Government. And so there are set-asides in title IV-B and Promoting Safe and Stable Families and other ways to say we want to put some money aside to make sure that tribal communities actually can get the support that they need.

And so my statements were -- are actually talking about the sufficiency of the amount of resources that are actually set aside. And so, when you take, say, \$6.4 million, or one \$10.3 million, and then divide that amongst 179 tribes, or 130 tribes, that is when you get down to what that actually means for that tribe. And so, if a tribe already has --

*Ms. Moore. Well, Dr. Bell, listen, this is very disturbing to me.

So there are two approaches. We can either buoy that account and plus-up that account, or we can make them eligible for the account that other people are eligible for, and plus that up. Do you have any recommendations for us?

*Mr. Bell. I would say that the first step in that process for me would be able to better understand the deficiencies of the history.

*Ms. Moore. Yes.

*Mr. Bell. And then we can be more thoughtful about how do we remedy that.

I wouldn't say that the first step is to throw a bunch of money at it, but I will say absolutely more money needs to be provided, in terms of supporting tribes, and tribes need to have direct access to those resources.

But when you think about the notion that there are 574 federally-recognized tribes in the country, we have got to really better understand how we can actually get resources to them, how we can engage other sectors, like nonprofit sectors, like the philanthropic sector, the business sector, in order to meet those needs and support them.

And the example that I give is that, when we talk about the number of states that have actually gotten an approved Family First prevention plan, only one tribe has an approved plan, and only two tribes actually have a submitted plan. And so 3 tribes out of 574 federally-recognized tribes have -- 1 has a plan, 2 have submitted plans.

So a lot of work has to be done to actually shore up the entities that work with tribes, so that they can actually develop the capacity to utilize resources. Because if you give resources to a group that don't have the infrastructure to actually effectively utilize those resources, then we still don't get the results that we are looking for.

*Ms. Moore. Well, Mr. Chairman, I would commend this testimony to you. We need to do something about this, and I would yield back.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you very much, and the gentlelady's time has expired. And I am pleased now to recognize for five minutes Representative Smucker.

*Mr. Smucker. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Walorski, for holding today's hearing.

You know, I am so appreciative of all of the organizations and agencies in my district who are helping foster children throughout the entire process. It has certainly been a priority of mine since I have been in Congress to help to place foster children with family members.

And in fact, I am really proud to say my first bill to ever be signed into law was legislation that simplified the process, helped simplify the process, so that more children can live safely with their family members, as I think you mentioned, Mr. Chairman. You know, that is what we want children to be able to do, they do better. If they can't stay in their home, they could stay with their family members.

I am really looking forward to working with both the chair and the ranking member on bipartisan legislation to reauthorize these critical child welfare programs that we are

talking about later this year.

Ms. Pierce, in response to the, you know, pandemic, we obviously passed the Supporting Foster Youth and Families Through the Pandemic Act that included increased education and training vouchers for Chafee-eligible youth. And in Pennsylvania, the state I am from, it was recently announced that the Commonwealth's tuition waivers, their waivers, were being used to help launch a new program geared towards improving higher education, graduation rates, and workforce readiness. And I wonder if you could speak to ways in which we can help prepare older foster youth to enter the workforce, and to begin to transition to that, to climb a stable career ladder.

*Ms. Pierce. You know, that is such a critical question and an acknowledgment that, really, for a child, education is their life work. And so, if children don't feel successful in school, they don't feel successful as an individual. So I think one of the keys is emphasizing the value and critical role that education and career exploration plays for foster children of all ages.

We have found that -- you know, we used to start career-building, skill-building at around age 12. That is too late, because many other children from our own families -- you know, our families who are focused on this -- are starting in preschool and elementary grades. So making sure that our child welfare system is paying as much attention to educational success as we are to that healing from the trauma and reuniting families is really essential.

And that bill and those resources were indeed critical. If children leave the foster care system without the ability to become self-sufficient, you know, whether it is through the armed services, as we talked about earlier, or a community college, or a four-year institution, you know, I always say we can't have it both ways. We have said to a child at four or five, "Your family is inadequate to care for you." Our states and our nation

become their family when we make that commitment. And so we have to be there for the long haul.

So I wholeheartedly agree that we need to encourage all child and family services agencies and our state child welfare agencies to make sure that we have got that concurrent intentional commitment, not just to healing and safety, but also to educational and employment preparation.

*Mr. Smucker. Sure.

*Ms. Pierce. It is very critical.

*Mr. Smucker. Yes, and so, as we are looking towards reauthorization again, are there other things that we should be thinking about?

Like, how do you feel we can better focus on supporting these older foster youth?

We have already talked about the suspending the ability to age out, which I think was very good, but how can we -- what other things should we be thinking about, as we look at reauthorization and how we can support them?

*Ms. Pierce. You know, the other critical piece is making sure they are eligible for Medicaid or state health care plans, because so many of them, because of their childhood not having regular, you know, medical homes, not having, well child visits, that we know are -- you know, put children on a good road for greater health -- and I can remember a day in the Indiana General Assembly when a young woman that The Villages was serving testified in front of our Medicaid committee that she had been admitted to Notre Dame, but she was a foster youth. And if she couldn't extend the medication that she needed for her diabetes, she wasn't going to be able to go on to college.

And so I think, in addition to focusing on that educational need, their health care needs, because they aren't on family insurance like most of our children are able to be, that is a critical issue.

*Mr. Smucker. Great. Thank you for bringing that up. Thank you for your input.

And again, thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I see I am out of time.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you very much. The gentleman's time has expired.

Consistent with the committee practice, we will now move to a two-to-one questioning ratio, beginning with Representative Evans.

*Mr. Evans. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for this hearing, and the ranking member also. The discussion is rewarding for all of us to understand things.

Dr. Bell, based on your work with children and families, how would stronger Federal investment in affordable housing, mental health services, essential -- help support, preserve, reunite -- reuniting families?

*Mr. Bell. Yes, thank you, Congressman Evans, for that question.

You know, investment in family supportive infrastructure, I think, is critical. Housing, while it should not be a reason for children being removed from their families, it does present a significant challenge to children to be able to return home to their families.

Housing is also a critical issue as it relates to young people aging out of foster care. One of the vouchers that is typically used for young people aging out of foster care is a family unification voucher from HUD. And the voucher that goes to young people aging out is the only voucher in that category that is considered a time-limited voucher. And it is one of the challenges that -- we are saying that we want kids to be able to step up and be self-supportive, but when you give them a year to 18 to 24 months on a voucher, that is clearly not enough time for them to acquire and sustain housing in order for them to achieve what they need in life.

I think that health care and other things that some of the members have mentioned that we take for granted are also issues that we need to be prepared to make sure that not,

only children in foster care, but their families have the capacity to have access to those programs, so that when the kids return home to them, another crisis doesn't emerge that causes those kids to come back into foster care.

*Mr. Evans. I am going to give a follow-up to that, Dr. Bell. How can we encourage states to fully utilize Family First funding to help reduce the need for foster care?

*Mr. Bell. I think that, when I look at where we are with Families First, it is a historical and bold step on the part of Congress to say to the states, "We no longer want to be funding more foster care than we are funding support to families." And I think that the Congress has to recognize the -- in terms of getting where we say we want to be.

And in that process of these first few years of actually moving in, I think some of the things that you have already done have been helpful, like passing the Families First Transition Act, which has given opportunities for states that may have some concerns about losing resources as they transition into this new way of doing business. And you have taken that into account.

I think that the No Aging Out move that you made takes that into account. The waiver of the match for preventive services, the waiver of the match for kinship navigator programs.

And in my testimony I actually recommend that you consider continuing that waiver of that match, at least for another year, and maybe even longer, because states need the opportunity to move from what they have grown to be so used to, to this new way of thinking about our children and our families and their communities as being safe places for children, as being supportive places for children, and thinking about the strengths that actually exist in all of our families. And I think Family First gives us a critical opportunity to reshape the dynamic of how the government interacts with vulnerable children and

families in our communities.

*Mr. Evans. One last question, Dr. Bell. Dr. Bell, can you speak more to the racial inequities that plague the child welfare system, from the Federal level down to the community level?

How can we address over-representation of Black children in all stages of the child welfare system?

*Mr. Bell. I think that, if we are honest about the history of systems development in our nation, every system that we have developed in our nation has not always worked the same for every community in our nation, and that, as we engage with meeting the needs of our children and families of color, that -- I think we have to begin to ask local systems to search themselves, and ask, what do you see, when you look at a family of color, that causes you to make a different decision in the same set of circumstances when you look at a White family?

What do you see, when you look at a poor family, who does not have means, that causes you to make different decisions for poor White families in Appalachia than you would make for middle-class or higher-income families?

And so it really is a period of searching how and why we make certain decisions. And there is quite a bit of research out there about how to make these decisions based on actual risk to children, as opposed to based on family dynamics and characteristics.

*Mr. Evans. Thank you, Dr. Bell.

I yield back the balance, and I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you, Mr. Evans.

The gentleman's time has expired. The chair is now pleased to be recognized for five minutes Representative Kildee.

*Mr. Kildee. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And to all the witnesses, thank you so

much for your testimony. I really appreciate it, it is an important discussion. And I apologize if any of my comments or questions are repetitive. We have been all sort of trying to multitask this morning. But thank you so much.

You know, my first real job in life was as a social worker at an agency in my hometown of Flint. It is called Whaley Children's Center. And I worked with children who had experienced trauma and abuse. And so a lot of this is really close to my heart. This is my original career before I went into government full-time.

So I want to focus a bit on an issue that I know we have been addressing, and that is the need to support youth who are aging out of foster care, as Ms. Cotton described, meaning to build a bridge for youth, as they transition to independent living and into adulthood.

And, of course, as we all know, in today's economy some post-secondary education, whether it is an apprenticeship program, an associate's degree, even a four-year college program, some of that post-secondary training is really necessary to get a job, even sustain a family. And there are these unique barriers that youth with experience in foster care face when pursuing post-secondary education. And of course, those barriers have been even made more difficult during this pandemic.

So institutions of higher education with campus-based support programs for foster youth that provide services like help securing stable housing during academic breaks, or counseling services, these kinds of interventions result in increased graduation rates for these students. For example, in Michigan, at Western Michigan University, their Seita Scholars Program, which serves foster youth, has a graduation rate of 42 percent for these students. That is right around the national average, and significantly above what we would typically see for young people who have experience in the foster care system.

Again, in my home state of Michigan, about 30 college campuses provide on-site

support and resources that are tailored to meet the unique needs of youth with experience in foster care while they are attending college. And so that is why I introduced legislation with my colleague, Representative Bacon, called the Fostering Postsecondary Success for Foster and Homeless Youth Act. It would expand these programs around the country, and create a recognition program through the U.S. Department of Education to identify and highlight those colleges and universities who have tailored, campus-based support for foster and homeless youth.

And secondly, it would also create a national center for fostering post-secondary success for foster and homeless youth to -- best practices, and provide technical help to institutions so that they can create and maintain their own campus-based supports.

So I wonder, Ms. Cotton, if you wouldn't mind, if you could speak to these particular challenges that you see foster youth experiencing while aging out and trying to pursue post-secondary education of some type. Would you address that for me?

*Ms. Cotton. Yes, thank you for this question. A lot of the young people that I work with, they can receive support from just programs that are on specific campuses within my county. But there is not flexible support. A lot of the programs that we have that -- our foster youth specifically have to reach levels to where we are eligible for this. So that means we have to work a certain amount of hours every month, or we have to be already enrolled in school doing, I believe, a certain -- as well as a certain amount of hours a month.

But we need support in order to actually reach those heights, from -- flexible financial support is going to be very important so we can have transportation back and forth to school, transportation back and forth to work, and just, in general, to give us that step up from aging out of foster care with no support, and then into adulthood with some amount of support in order to get there.

*Mr. Kildee. So, I mean, is it your view that having a centralized source of information about what really can work, and sharing some of that with these institutions would be of value? I guess that is what I am asking.

It sounds like -- let me ask it another way. There are examples of how this is really done right. And that is what we want to highlight. I guess I am hopeful that --

[Audio malfunction.]

*Mr. Kildee. So, again, I appreciate your perspective on this, Ms. Cotton.

*Ms. Cotton. Yes, I honestly do wish there was -- I know that they have done a better job now with providing resource guides. But if resource guides were, you know, just a policy that -- young people would be able to have access to them, as well as the case workers and other foster youth-specific resources surrounding them, that would be of great help. I know I didn't have a list of resources that could help me with college, even if I did choose to go once I aged out.

*Mr. Kildee. Thank you, and I see my time has expired. Thanks to all the witnesses.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you, Mr. Kildee.

The gentleman's time has expired, and the chair now recognizes for five minutes Representative Hern.

*Mr. Hern. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Walorski, for this so important meeting. There is nothing more important in America, in my opinion, than helping our young people get a start in life when things seem kind of unfair, and many times over.

Last year has been really hard, incredibly hard, for Oklahomans, for a variety of reasons. In my home state we have about 7,000 children in foster care. Even during the

best of times, children in foster care face the worst of circumstances, and we all want nothing more than for our vulnerable youth to be -- have stable and loving homes, as we have heard from great testimony here today.

I am especially proud of the work Oklahoma did to help our foster youth get through the pandemic, and I want to highlight one of their successes. In the state's fiscal year 2020, over 1,900 children left state care through reunification. We are also seeing private investment from philanthropic organizations that are making significant, significant investments to improve children's well-being. So I have got a question.

And Ms. Pierce, I really thank you for your longevity and what you have been doing for your entire career, and for the other witnesses, as well. But specifically to you, Ms. Pierce, can you speak to the importance of private-public partnership, and what initiatives like this can mean for improving the outcomes of our nation's most vulnerable children and their families?

*Ms. Pierce. Absolutely. And, as you know, I mentioned the power of partnerships in my testimony, that that is really what allowed an agency like The Villages that serves 3,100 children every day to make a difference in those lives. It was the United Ways; it was Lilly Endowment; Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust, a local foundation; Department of Child Services; and our private sector agencies, all working together to listen to family voice, number one, and say, "What do you most need?"

One of the challenges was a child care crisis. Those families who could still go to work, if they were in a service industry or in the health care industry, many of the child care centers had shut down. So some of us opened up some of the space that we had in our offices and facilities to care for children. And the state was willing to be flexible, in terms of licensing. So I think identifying what families and youth need, and then working together to break down the barriers, at least temporarily.

And I think the exciting thing is we have learned that some of those barriers perhaps are unnecessary. And so my hope is that we will come out of the pandemic modeling that kind of collaborative work and certainly -- you mentioned, too, the philanthropic sector. They are so critical in helping us have the back of every child that we serve, particularly those older youth aging out of foster care. Many of them lost their hourly jobs. That was what was paying their car insurance, if they were fortunate enough to have a car. And so we had individual donors and foundations that were willing to step up, so that we could stand in the gap on their behalf.

So partnerships is the only way. We understand that the Federal Government can't fully fund. And so states need to step up. Our philanthropic partners need to stand up. And we, as organizations -- I have spent the vast majority of my time last year raising additional funding, so that we could meet the food and security needs and provide, again, those diapers, provide hot spots and iPads for children so that they wouldn't compound their -- you know, often times foster children are two years behind their peers, educationally. We did not want that to be three years. In fact, we wanted to close the gap.

So I hope that speaks to your question, Representative.

*Mr. Hern. It does. And again, I thank you so much for your time today, and all the witnesses.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

*Chairman Davis. I thank the gentleman for yielding back. And the chair now is pleased to recognize for five minutes Mr. Panetta.

*Mr. Panetta. Great, thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Walorski. I appreciate this opportunity. And let me start off by not just thanking you, but thanking all the witnesses for being here today, and providing their testimony, but also providing us

with your time and your preparation for being here today, and providing your experiences and expert guidance. They clearly are very important to help everyone here understand the successes and the challenges of foster youth, and that foster youth and families currently face. I think we understand that.

Now, obviously, I am a little biased, being from California, but I do believe that California has been the leader in removing bias and discrimination from foster and adoption care services. But as we heard today, that is certainly not the case everywhere. And clearly, more work needs to be done.

In particular, LGBT youth, transgender, and gender-queer youth are more likely to face homelessness and unsafe home situations. So it is critical that they have access to foster care and adoption services. And, according to the Census Bureau, nationally, same-sex couples are at least four times more likely to adopt. The same report also notes that LGBT families are six times more likely to foster children. So foster and adoption services should be designed to make that possible, I believe. And that is why I am a strong supporter of the Every Child Deserves a Family Act, and look forward to working with the committee to make sure this bill becomes law.

Let me just kind of talk about something, and I will go on to Dr. William Bell, and -
- with the Casey Family Programs.

In your written testimony you call for the use of the California evidence-based clearinghouse as the standard for evidence, no longer using Prevention Services Clearinghouse. Can you give us a little more distinction, a little more clarity between the two, and about why you think that is necessary?

*Mr. Bell. So thank you, Representative Panetta, for your question. And so I just want to clarify that the recommendation that we are making is not either/or of the two clearinghouses. The recommendation that we are making is that, as we have talked to

states and tribes around looking at the prevention clearinghouses approach, the length of time that it has taken to get evidence-based programs incorporated into that clearinghouse, the scarcity, in terms of evidence-based programs that are found in that clearinghouse that can actually be utilized with communities of color, we are simply recommending that we move at a pace that is necessary to meet the need that Congress saw when it passed Families First.

And so the need that we are focused on is getting states to a place where they can have programs and services that are actually addressing the needs of the families that they have in their system. And so we look at the California evidence-based clearinghouse, which has been around, as I said earlier, for many, many years, and has been widely utilized and widely recognized as being a transparent, effective place to go to look for programs that have been proven to have an impact on families.

And so our recommendation is that we -- not that we have these clearinghouses compete with each other, but that we widen the net. And if something has been proven to be effective, we don't need to reinvent the wheel in this very critical time. And so our recommendation, really, is that Congress make your intent known, because I think the intent was that we expand the availability of proven programming in this space so that we can have children and families.

And we believe that, if you expand the clearinghouse capacity to utilize the California clearinghouse, and if there are other clearinghouses out there that have a similar background and track record, that we also open the door so that they can be accessed, as well.

*Mr. Panetta. Outstanding. Thank you for that thorough explanation and, of course, all of your work.

Mr. Chairman, I am going to yield back. Thank you.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you very much, and I want to thank the gentleman for yielding back. And the chair now is pleased to recognize for five minutes the gentleman from Nevada, Representative Horsford.

[Pause.]

*Chairman Davis. Representative Horsford, are you there?

If not, then we will recognize for five minutes Representative Miller.

*Mrs. Miller. Thank you, Chairman Davis and Ranking Member Walorski, and thank you to all of the witnesses who are here today.

In West Virginia the opioid epidemic devastated families, and pushed thousands of kids into the foster care system. Today there are more than 7,000 kids in West Virginia's foster care system, which is a 71 percent increase over the past decade.

Foster care children across the country can suffer traumatic experiences very early in life. In West Virginia it often starts with parental substance abuse, and then will escalate to physical abuse and neglect. These kids grow up, become adults, and the cycle then goes on again.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed these issues. When the kids are not in school, it is really difficult to identify an unsafe household until the extreme situation becomes -- it materializes. There are fewer cases being reported, but those that are, the news isn't real good. Instead of mild cases, we are seeing severe cases of abuse and neglect.

Our central focus, when it comes to foster care policy, should be on the well-being of the child. We have the responsibility of providing families with the resources and services in alternative placements that demonstrate positive results. As we approach bipartisan reauthorization of our child welfare systems, it is critical that we focus on thoughtful policies that promote the value of families by connecting children to the loving,

nurturing homes that can improve their quality of life and set them up for success as adults.

Ms. Pierce, even though fewer Federal resources flow to West Virginia than any other state represented on this panel, I want to highlight that we have had an approved Family First Prevention Services Plan since September of 2020. Although we have an approved Prevention Services Plan, according to the Census Bureau, in West Virginia there are at least an estimated 25,000 families caring for children who are not living with their biological parents. Our state knows the importance of peer-to-peer support, and is building on the successes of kinship care by building the West Virginia Foster Adoptive and Kinship Parents Network.

Ms. Pierce, can you speak to the importance of peer-to-peer service networks for our foster youth and for relative caregivers?

*Ms. Pierce. Absolutely. In fact, that peer support network of family support groups is the basis of The Village's Family Connection Network, which is our kinship care program. And we were able to continue that virtually on a biweekly basis. We provide our kinship caregivers with donated gift cards, so that they could order carry-out meals, so that they could be attentive, then, to what other caregivers were experiencing.

And again, just as Weston and Kai have testified, when you know you are not the only one, that can help you put one foot in front of the other for the next week, and the next month. So that is invaluable.

You know, I think the other thing that many of us are saying throughout the country is there is so much focus on reporting child abuse and neglect, but what if we became family supporters, rather than family reporters? And I think that is a whole different frame that can engage the faith community in what do those caregivers in West Virginia need?

I know well Children's Home Society of West Virginia, their CEO, Steve Tuck, and work with him on a national level on a number of initiatives. So I know their passion is

what ours is, in terms of supporting those families. And if -- indeed, we need foster care having the highest quality, you know, diverse cadre of foster parents we possibly can, but first and foremost, supporting those caregivers, as I have just highlighted.

So as Dr. Bell said, continuing that waiver for match dollars for states is critical. We need to acknowledge that family circle is, first and foremost, where those children want to be, and where the data says they have the greatest permanency and stability. So I would fully support everything that you have said, Representative Miller.

*Mrs. Miller. Well, I love the thought of being supporters, as opposed to reporters.

And since I am the last person speaking today, are there any other things you would like to highlight in this last 30 seconds that we have?

*Ms. Pierce. You think -- I think, more than anything, we need to remind ourselves and all of those folks we come in contact with that we understand not all of you can be a foster, adoptive, or kinship care parent, but we can support those who are. It goes back to that family supporters. If they need diapers because they are raising little ones, and it is diapers versus groceries next week, let's provide diapers. If they need food, let's provide that.

The e-learning opportunities over the summer to help some of these young people make up what they have lost this past year would be a huge gift, educationally, for those children.

So I think all of us engaging where we can to stand in the gap, just as those caregivers are standing in the gap.

*Mrs. Miller. Thank you so much, Mr. Chairman. I yield back my time.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you, Representative Miller. The gentlelady's time has expired.

I understand that Representative Horsford is back with us, and the chair now

recognizes Representative Horsford for five minutes.

*Mr. Horsford. Thank you very much, Chairman Davis. I really appreciate you holding this important hearing to discuss ways that we can provide additional support for families and foster youth.

We have a long history, especially in this committee, of bipartisan collaboration, and making real investments to reduce the need for foster care, and ensuring that, when necessary, foster care is affirming and supportive.

I would be remiss if I didn't say hello to my good friend, Dr. William Bell. Thank you for joining us, and I appreciate the testimony and expertise each of our witnesses have provided today.

I have long supported the shift towards prevention and keeping families safely together in our child welfare system. As you know, the Ways and Means Committee led the effort to fundamentally change our system through the passage of the Family First Preventative Services Act. I am now proud to be a part of the effort to ensure that children and families at risk of entering into foster care have the tools and supports that they need to stay together, rather than being torn apart.

But we still have a bit of difficulty in Nevada getting our program up and running. Dr. Bell, what have you been able to see, as far as successful examples from states implementing the Family First Preventative Services Act, and what recommendations do you have for states like Nevada that are still working to implement the law?

*Mr. Bell. Sure, thank you, Representative Horsford, and your long commitment to this issue, as well.

You know, I would start with the perspective, and the long-view perspective. It was 38 years from the 1980 child welfare law passed by Congress, 92-272, to the passage of Families First in 2018. And I think that we have to recognize, with Families First, that

we are on the cusp of moving into a new way of thinking about the way that we do this work.

Casey Family Programs has a long history of working with Clark County in the State of Nevada. And I think that the important thing for us, and for all of those states who have not yet received an approved plan -- only 12 have approved plans, 12 have submitted plans -- that we take a look at some of those states that have received approval, and what is some of the content?

What have they -- what do we -- what can we glean and learn from what they have been doing? Washington, D.C. is one of those places. Arkansas has an approved plan. Kansas, Kentucky, the State of Washington, West Virginia.

And, you know, I think that having a conversation with West Virginia is a great place to look. West Virginia submitted their plan in December of 2019. Their approval didn't happen until September of 2020. And so there was a long, drawn-out process of going back and forth in conversation with the Federal Government and with the state about what the content of that plan should be, and how to actually roll it out.

And so what I would say to Nevada and other states is take a look at how you want to absolutely transform the way you interact with families in need. Take a look at how you absolutely want to transform those upfront interactions, so that fewer children are coming into foster care, and more children are getting the help and support that they need to remain safely in their homes.

Take a look at your court system, and have an image of how you want to transform the interactions that parents have when they walk in and out of a court building, the transparency that is there, how scheduling is done. As opposed to having all of the scheduling of hearings be focused on the availability of the judge, and the availability of the attorney, how about the availability of the families and children in that process?

And so what I would say to you is, let's think very differently and critically about how we lived for 38 years in this system, and how we want to live for the next 40 to 50 years with a brand new system, and be able to engage other states, Casey Family Programs, other nonprofit organizations that can help you think that through.

*Mr. Horsford. Thank you, Dr. Bell. I really appreciate your insights.

Charles, I want to give you the final word. Your testimony was so powerful. I know that you entered the foster care system as a teenager, mainly because of the inability of your biological parents to support you as an openly gay, Black child. And I want to know what you feel like we all should be doing to address supportive services to help more foster youth successfully transition.

*Mr. Charles-Gallo. Yes, so thank you so much for this question. I really think that it boils down to ones that are serving, you know, foster care youth who identify as LGBTQ. I think it is so important to have the training, you know, on the means of, like, sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as, you know, matching these youth with LGBTQ organizations for support and resources.

So in my foster care, you know, experience I was in Brunswick, Missouri, which is a very small town. And, you know, about an hour or two, there were, you know, resources and organizations that were only within driving distance. And so, if my social worker would have went above and beyond, you know -- to find those resources and those connections, you know, I would have been better supported, and felt like I wasn't alone.

And so I think it really just boils down to, you know, stepping back and understanding that, you know, everyone is deserving of a family and affirming space, you know, a safe space. And I think that religious freedom should no longer, you know, get in the way of that, and hinder some -- you know, a youth from having the right and -- you know, deserving of a family. So thank you.

*Mr. Horsford. Thank you. I appreciate it very much.

I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

*Chairman Davis. Thank you, thank you, Representative Horsford.

I would like to thank all of our witnesses for your testimony today.

Please be advised that members have two weeks to submit written questions to be answered later in writing. Those questions and your answers will be made part of the formal hearing record.

I thank all of the members for participating today.

And Representative Moore, I want you to know that we heard you when you dug into the question of disparate funding, or lack of funding for tribal youth.

So, again, we thank our witnesses. We thank all of the members. And with that, the Subcommittee on Worker and Family Support stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:52 a.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

Member Submissions for the Record follow:

[Rep. Walorski](#)

Submissions for the Record follow:

[Ascend at the Aspen Institute](#)

[CTF](#)

[CHAMPS](#)

[County of Los Angeles](#)

[CWLA](#)

[DCFS](#)

[FFCC](#)

[Fiscal Equity Center](#)

[Generations United](#)

[InterACT](#)

[Lambda Legal and Co.](#)

[NACC](#)

[National Crittenton](#)

[NETWORK Lobby](#)

[PFLAG National](#) Submission

[The Sheridan Group](#)

[True Colors United](#)

[USC Center for Changing Family](#) Submission

[Voice for Adoption](#)

[Youth Law Center](#)