

May 25, 2023

Testimony: Senate Budget

Subject: That the State provide the same level of support for kinship care providers as it does for foster parents.

Chair Dolan, Vice-Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes and Members of the Senate Finance Committee.

Good Morning

I am sorry that I cannot be here in person but I have prepared this written testimony to be read to you. My name is Tim Walters. I live in Cuyahoga County. I am currently 80 years old and have 8 children, 24 grandchildren and 5 great grandchildren. I have been both a foster parent and a kinship care provider.

I speak today to urge that this state provide the same level of support for kinship care providers as it does for foster parents. Children come into our childcare system for a variety of reasons. When they do so, there are a variety of paths they can follow if it is determined that the child cannot remain with their parent or parents. The two commonly preferred are foster care or kinship care.

I am not here to put down the foster care alternative. It is a critical component, and we have many great foster parents. But it has been long recognized that there is much value in keeping a child in familiar circumstances with familiar faces. Kinship care does that. As such it should be the preferred alternative and support should be provided at the same level as for a foster care placement.

About 23 years ago, I received a phone call from one of my daughters. She informed me that Cuyahoga County was in the process of removing her 6-year-old daughter from her home and placing her into the foster care system.

My daughter had and still has a variety of mental health problems. Over the years, with a variety of help, she has learned how to cope and respond to her own needs and is a much different person than she was then.

At that time, our county had determined that she was unable to provide for her daughter. I told the worker that they could place my granddaughter with me instead of within the foster care system. They agreed to do this.

At the time, I was in my late 50's and had not expected to be caring for a young child again. I was able to get a foster care license providing funds to help.

For a variety of reasons, she remained with me until adulthood. At present, she is in her late twenties, in a committed relationship and has a 7-year-old daughter of her own. Further, her mother has resolved many of her problems and has been able to rebuild her family.

Much of our success stems from the placement of my granddaughter with me and thus maintaining our extended family unit. My granddaughter grew up with support and direction while maintaining an ongoing bond with mother. It was not easy, but we persevered.

Removing a child from parents sets several different factors in motion. No matter what the age, it is a very difficult time for the child and can easily set in motion a variety of new problems. Placing a child in a kinship care setting instead of foster care has for some time been an important alternative. Among other factors this provides love and care in a familiar setting while enabling children to live with people they know and trust.

This was true for our family. Key was our ability to maintain my granddaughter within our family unit. She was scared when she first came to live with me. She was only six and did not understand anything that was happening to her. But she did know and trust me, and we were able to build on that trust.

My daughter was going through much at the time. There were many difficulties, but she was able to face them knowing where and how her daughter was being cared for. It was a significant factor in enabling her to make her own gains.

My story is one that many of our kinship care providers share. A key factor that many of us also share is that of the need for financial support. Kinship care providers typically receive much less support than do foster parents.

Keep in mind that these dollars would still be utilized should the children be placed in a regular foster care setting. But this would also move them out of their extended family. Allow them to remain with their own extended family in a kinship care setting. Provide the resources to help with everyday activities, reduce the strain on the kinship providers finances and maintain a critical element allowing these children to move towards a sustainable future.

In closing them, I ask that you move forward to ensure that all kinship care providers receive the same level of support as those within the foster care system.