

STATEMENT OF JOSCELYNN MURDOCK
Former Foster Youth from California

Hearing on Innovations in Child Welfare Waivers: Starting on the Pathway to Reform
United States Senate Committee on Finance

Thursday, March 10, 2011

Chairman Baucus, Ranking Member Hatch, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I thank the Members of the Committee for their commitment to creating a better life and a brighter future for children who are living in foster care today.

My name is Joscelynn Murdock and I am 26 years old. As an eight-year-old little girl, I entered The California foster care system, where I would be a dependent of the state until I aged out of the system at age 18.

I know that “everything that doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger,” and I am definitely a stronger person for what I have been through. But I often find myself playing the “what if” game. I look back at my foster care story – and wonder if the system had made slightly different choices – could things have been different for me?

As I ponder this question, I always look back to where it all began. I remember us being a happy family — not a perfect one and probably not as healthy as most would approve —but a happy one, nonetheless. It was my two sisters, my mom and I. When I was little, all that I cared about is being together — and we were. But things were tough on my mom; she was a single mother of three, dirt poor, and was mentally ill.

I remember moving from place to place and always being left with different people while she would go off and work. We constantly were bouncing around, and she had trouble holding a job and keeping us in a stable living situation. I am sure it was not easy to find a sitter for three little girls, especially when you have no support and little money. Not long, the reality of what our lives were becoming hit my mom: we were being evicted from our apartment, the grandparents who raised her had just passed away and she knew she could no longer care for us the way she needed.

So she did the hardest thing a mother must, and made arrangements for us girls to live with each of our fathers. But there was one minor problem; she had no clue where *my* father was and was forced to keep me. Life from that point on without my sisters only got worse. I was lonely because now when she left, I was all by myself. Now when random people would help out, there was no one there to protect me. My mother took giving my sisters away hard and went further into her own world — which left me even more alone.

The times she would be gone lasted longer and I was forced to grow up faster. Soon it was brought to the attention of CPS that I was being left alone, and I was taken from her at the age of eight for child neglect. She knew she was in the wrong and told them to adopt me out so I could have a better life. But when adoption was explained to me, I was told I would get a “NEW family.” I refused to go because, well, I already *had* a family — a broken one, but it was *mine* and I wanted to hold on to what I knew.

I always wonder, what if someone had explained adoption to me as not getting a *new* family, but having a *bigger* family? What then...?

The next “what if” had to do with relatives that were never told about my situation. After many years spent in foster care, I learned of an Aunt and Uncle. I met them. They are a good, solid family, and no one ever told them about the predicament my sisters and I were in. I wonder what would have happened if the system had looked a little harder for a relative? My relatives had three children of their own, and may have needed financial assistance to bring my sisters and I into their home, but I believe they would have tried. I know they loved us. While I feel blessed today to have a strong and healthy relationship with them, I just wish it wouldn't have come after my childhood had passed.

Lastly, I wonder why I had to spend 10 years in the foster care system. Ten years of birthdays being a “foster kid.” Ten years not having a family to call my own. Ten years believing that I was unwanted. Ten years too long.

I believe that if there is any way we can move young people into permanency, into lifelong connections, we should. If we want to see success stories, then we must make a path for them to travel that makes being a successful more of an option. I spent all ten years with one family, yet no one ever approached us about adoption after the first time I said “no.” To some children, particularly those with strong bonds to siblings or birth parents, HOW adoption is presented to us makes a big difference. As a child and teen, I thought being adopted would mean leaving the other family members I loved behind.

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Today, I do not want to just focus on the negatives but want to highlight some of the things that really helped me while growing up in foster care. Through a supportive foster parent, I was encouraged to join recreational and school activities from soccer to cheerleading, and eventually, 4 years of choir in high school. I also was lucky enough to attend church camp every summer where I made lifelong connections and came home with mentors that walked along side me throughout the years. All of these activities kept me busy and out of trouble.

One thing that made the biggest difference was the many accommodations over the years to keep me in connection with my older sister, Cynthia. Summer visits were arranged and frequent calls and letters were made. When I aged out of the foster care system and was looking homelessness straight in the eye, my connection to my sister saved me from couch surfing and inevitably living in the streets. As I graduated from California's Independent Living Program (ILP), the program gave me silverware, a microwave, a duffel bag and a few other household necessities. This farewell and good luck package was supposed to ensure that foster youth “made it” once out of the program. I remember everyone being so excited for me because I was one of the “prepared” ones out of my group. I was the one everyone expected to succeed. I was supposed to have it all together, but the truth of the matter is that I was terrified, but I felt like I could not let anyone know. I was turning 18 and it was my time to go. If I did not have it all together, then it was my fault. I remember getting onto the plane to Hawaii and crying the whole way there. I spent a little over a year in Hawaii trying to figure out what being on my own really meant. Despite all my grand plans and dreams, I did not attend college and only worked part time. Had it not been for my sister's provision of free room and board, I would have been homeless.

In addition, I was blessed with a foster mother who was greatly supportive. She taught me everything I know today and has been a blessing in my life. Without her I am not sure where I would be. The state placed me in the perfect home, with the perfect family — I just wish they had helped us to seal the deal. My foster mother, Sue Crowley, is a hero — not just to me, but also to many youth who have passed through her home and have been touched by her willingness to listen, wise words, and loving ways. Now, is she perfect or is our relationship as mother and daughter perfect...? Far from it! But it has changed my life for the better and she has provide for me what my biological mother struggled to do, but could not. She has given me a chance to break a cycle of unhealthy choices and make a clear path of my own.

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While I still wonder if my story could have been different, I know that our experiences shape us. So I am grateful for all that I have been through and thankful for the people that have been placed in my life that have guided me, supported me and pushed me to be who I am today. I have been able to move forward from my past. Time has helped to heal the wounds and a little faith and a positive attitude has helped me move forward in life. Also, after interning with FosterClub and discovering that adoption could mean ADDING ON to your family — not replacing them — I had some life-changing conversations with Sue, the wonderful foster parent I mentioned. At age 25, my adoption became legalized.

And about a year and half ago, I married a wonderful man, Kevin Murdock. Our wedding was a perfect example of what family has come to mean to me. We decided *not* to have a bride's side or groom's side — and I did not walk down the middle. Instead, we married in a circle, bringing all of our families together. On my wedding day, I was in a circle of trust, which included my biological family, my adopted family, my friends that served as family, and lastly, the new family I was joining through marrying Kevin. To me, it represented the perfect picture of what I think young people deserve — being surrounded by a circle of people who love and support them.

I am currently finishing my bachelor's degree at University of California at Santa Barbara, and I am working hard at developing partnerships in my community that will connect young people from foster care with supportive adults that can change their lives.

I urge the Committee to consider how reforming the child welfare financing structure to provide flexibility, so that states and communities can provide prevention services, supports for relative care, or any other specific supports a little girl who enters foster care tomorrow might need.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,
Joscelynn "JoJo" Carbonelle Crowely Murdock