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HATCH STATEMENT AT FINANCE COMMITTEE HEARING EXAMINING CHILD WELFARE WAIVERS

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), Ranking Member of the Senate Finance Committee, today delivered the following opening statement at a committee hearing examining child welfare waivers:

The Senate Finance Committee has a long history of collaborative work on child welfare issues, and I am pleased that the tradition continues.

The purpose of this hearing is for Members of the Committee to determine if extending the option for states to apply for child welfare waivers could improve outcomes for children and youth in — or at risk — of going into foster care.

If history is any guide, giving states greater flexibility and greater options will likely result in better outcomes. I firmly believe that policy experimentation at the state level — in our 50 laboratories of democracy — leads to positive outcomes for citizens and the states in which they live. Our Founders understood this when they created a federal government of limited powers and maintained the fundamental sovereignty of the states.

Mr. Chairman, if the Committee determines that it is in the best interest of children and families to do so, I will work with you to craft legislation to give states that flexibility.

It is said that a society is measured by how it treats its weakness members, including, of course, its children. By this standard, there is much we can do to improve.

Our nation's child welfare system is in desperate need of reform.

The current foster care financing structure is unsustainable.

Federal priorities are misplaced.

The majority of federal funds for child welfare are directed at the least desirable outcome: removing a child or children from the home and placing that child in foster care, often disrupting families and separating children from their siblings.

A very small percentage of federal funds are spent on evidenced based family preservation activities which have demonstrated success in helping families stay together.

Once in foster care, children and youth are routinely isolated and restricted from participating in normal age appropriate activities.

Children and youth in foster care are often prevented from playing sports, attending school events, field trips or summer camp.

Older youth in foster care can be inappropriately medicated and segregated in substandard congregate care facilities.

The current system does not adequately serve youth transitioning out of foster care.

Every year nearly 30,000 young people exit foster care without a permanent family or a meaningful connection with a caring adult.

It is not uncommon for these young people – 18 years old – to have their few belongings placed in a garbage bag and subsequently driven to a homeless shelter.

These youth, not surprisingly, have much higher rates of unemployment, homelessness, incarceration and drug and alcohol abuse.

A number of states have indicated that with some flexibility in the financing structure of child welfare, they could develop and implement innovative strategies that can reduce the number of children and youth entering foster care, while also improving the circumstances for children in the child welfare system, including those in foster care.

Today we will hear from witnesses who will speak to the need to reform the child welfare system, from a state that has shown what can be done with flexibility, and how an expansion of waivers could result in improved outcomes for children and youth in care as well as a greater capacity for states to keep struggling families together.

If the Committee elects to expand state waiver authority and if innovative state practices produce the desired results, I believe we will be on our way to developing a blueprint which could lead to comprehensive child welfare reform.

Thank you to our expert panel of witnesses for being here today and I look forward to hearing your testimony.

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