

The United States Senate
COMMITTEE on FINANCE
U.S. SENATOR RON WYDEN (D-OREGON), RANKING MEMBER



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Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing on Foster Care Group Homes
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WASHINGTON – *Senate Finance Committee Ranking Member Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) delivered the following statement at a hearing to discuss how to safely reduce reliance on foster care group homes:*

Thank you Chairman Hatch. You have been a real leader on this topic, and I'm grateful for that.

As the title of this hearing suggests, foster care group homes are “no place to grow up.”

There's no question that residential care can play a crucial role in the foster care system. But there is wide consensus that children and youth, especially young children, are best served in a family setting. Stays in residential care should be based on the child's specialized behavioral and mental health needs or a child's clinical disabilities. They should be used only for as long as necessary to stabilize the child or youth before returning to a family setting.

This notion is catching on. Over the last decade, states have cut by over one third the number of children living in congregate care. However, there has been wide variation in states' success in this area—with some even increasing their use of congregate care over the last decade.

To further reduce residential foster care, the conversation must focus on transforming the old group home model into one that is nimble and flexible—able to meet the needs of each child and family rather than forcing an inappropriate and ineffective one-size-fits-all approach.

As this committee will hear today, this transformation is possible, even within the current lopsided funding system. But, the federal government can make innovation much easier by providing greater flexibility in the use of Title IV-E foster care funds—flexibility that accepts the reality that there is no single approach that will work for each and every child and family.

To spur these innovations, more information and more ideas are needed. That's why this hearing is so important and why we need to hear from today's witnesses about their on-the-ground experiences with congregate care. I'm especially grateful to Associate Commissioner Chang for coming to discuss the Administration's proposal to reduce the use of these settings.

I'd like to make three observations on this topic. First, there's no question that high quality, residential care plays a crucial role in the foster care continuum. But at the same time, it's clear that not everybody's on the same page when we talk about congregate care. The terms "congregate care," "group homes" and "residential treatment" are often used interchangeably; but the structure and quality of these settings varies widely as our witnesses will show.

Second, it's important that the discussion over safely reducing congregate care commensurately focuses on building the capacity for foster parents, kin, adoptive parents and entire communities to care for children in family settings.

And third, the best way to reduce reliance on congregate care is to prevent children from entering foster care at all. For decades lawmakers, practitioners and advocates have talked about the need to provide support and prevention services for children and families in crisis. These investments can help keep children safe in their homes or with other family members while reducing the need for costly and traumatic transfers to the foster care system.

For this reason, I've drafted legislation to reform the foster care finance structure to give states and tribes the ability to use federal dollars that are now reserved only for foster care placements to finance new tools to keep families together.

It's time to consider new approaches, new ways of funding, and new ways of thinking that serve the goal we all want – ensuring all kids grow up in healthy, nurturing, and safe environments.

It's no understatement to say children are counting on us to get this right. I look forward to working with you, Chairman Hatch, my colleagues, and others to make sure we accomplish this goal.

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