

**Testimony of
Eric Fenner
Managing Director – Strategic Consulting
Casey Family Programs**

**U.S. Senate Committee on Finance
Hearing on the Antwone Fisher Story as a Case Study for Child Welfare
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Good morning Chairman Baucus, Ranking Member Hatch and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the invitation to join you today.

I am Eric Fenner, Managing Director for Strategic Consulting with Casey Family Programs, a national foundation committed to improving the lives of vulnerable children and families in America by building communities of hope.

Casey Family Programs has been serving children in foster care for more than 45 years. We believe that the goals of the nation around securing well-being for all children should be about both: 1) keeping children who have been abused and neglected safe from further harm; and 2) preventing abuse and neglect and the need for foster care in the first place by strengthening vulnerable families and their communities.

Recently I retired after spending 32 years in public service, over 20 of those years were spent in child welfare. I worked as a front line worker for 10 years, investigating child abuse and neglect, placing children in foster and congregate care. I retired as the Executive Director of Franklin County Children Services, serving a large urban community.

The transformation I have directly experienced in child welfare over the last 25 years is extraordinary. In Franklin County, we have gone from a practice that was punitive and focused exclusively on fault finding, to one that is more family engaging and strength-based. Child welfare agencies today are less administrative and rigid and more results oriented. We have access to research and evidence-based practices that allow us to have a better idea of what services will be most responsive to a particular set of problems experienced by the families we serve.

We have gone from a system that was isolated from the community with a child rescue mentality with an emphasis on placing children foster care to a system that is more collaborative, both with other systems and the community. This did not happen overnight – it took a concerted effort from key partners and a commitment from the child welfare agency to change our practice and work but the outcomes have been tremendous. I've seen this work in Franklin County.

In Franklin County, we believed it was important that we alter how we worked with families if we expected their response to change and our outcomes to improve. To accomplish this required leadership, a shared ownership and commitment to the vision by the community partners, and different thinking. Fortunately, within Ohio, we operated under a child welfare demonstration project, or waiver, which allowed us to repurpose federal funds and align them with our goals.

In lieu of simply supporting foster care and removing children from their families and communities, our waiver allowed our agency the flexibility to invest federal dollars in community-based services that provide quality alternatives to foster care. I want to thank this Committee for their leadership and support in 2011 that provided a pathway through the Child and Family Services Improvement Act for additional states to apply for these waivers.

In Franklin County, we learned that the ability to make smarter investments was important to implement what we knew was better for our children and families. Practice initiatives like Differential Response, also called Alternative Response in other jurisdictions, allow agencies to use an alternative approach to traditional investigations. We often think of the child welfare system as simply foster care but that is not the case. Differential Response recognizes that the majority of families that come to the attention of public child welfare agencies have not abused their children, but are in need of supportive services aimed at strengthening their families. Police officers do not respond to someone going 15 miles per hour over the speed limit in the same way they would to an armed robbery. The best child welfare systems recognize that each and every family should be assessed on an individual basis, and a response identified that addresses what would best support, stabilize and strengthen that family while assuring child safety. Foster care should be our last resort, not our first response.

I believe what we accomplished in Franklin County was tremendous and that for children and families in this community, practice is now aligned with the outcomes the community values. The waiver was a tool to support this, but unfortunately for other counties, this flexibility is not available. Unfortunately, not all counties in Ohio have the waiver. These counties are limited in their abilities to reinvest federal dollars saved from the declining number of children entering foster care. As a result, they are challenged in their efforts to build capacity in their communities for services that could be used as an alternative to foster care.

It is important that we continue to strive for improvements and smarter investments in child welfare. Mr. Fisher's story is still an important example for our work that highlights the value everyone places on support and strong relationships. Nationally, we continue to make progress toward permanency for children in foster care. The Adoption Incentives program, first authorized in the Adoption and Safe Families Act, has helped to support and incentivize more permanent placements. Today, we support more children through federal adoption assistance than we do through the federal foster care system. Given the success thus far under this program, we believe it is important to continue to incentivize permanency as the Adoption Incentives programs has done. At the same time, we must work to ensure that no child leaves foster care without a permanent connection and recognize that we can measure permanency in many ways. The Permanency Roundtable work within Casey Family Programs has helped to inform this. Our ability to achieve permanency for every child is limited only by our efforts and willingness to explore each and every avenue. We must recognize that permanent relationships, even though they may not lead to permanent placements are extremely valuable to every child.

Thank you for the invitation to appear today. I'd be happy to answer any questions.