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April 23, 2013

Contact: Sean Neary/Meaghan Smith
(202) 224-4515

Hearing Statement of Senator Max Baucus (D-Mont.)
on Improving the Child Foster Care System
As prepared for delivery

Winston Churchill once said, "There is no doubt that it is around the family and the home that all the greatest virtues — the most dominating virtues of human society — are created, strengthened and maintained."

As the nation and Congress debate big policies, we can never forget the impact each home has on a small child. This impact stays with a child throughout his or her life. And strong homes improve our society and our country.

The Senate Finance Committee plays a key role in strengthening the home by overseeing the nation's child welfare system. This is an important issue to me. Each year, close to 3,000 children in my home state of Montana enter foster care. Too often, they are the victims of abuse or neglect; just children, but forced at a young age to deal with serious family issues.

The good people at the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services work to find safe, caring homes for all of these kids. They are restoring their hope for a better future, but it is not easy.

Today, we will discuss solutions to the challenges these kids face as we examine America's foster system. We'll discuss ways to find a loving home for every child who needs one. We will focus on the story of one child who grew up in the foster system. The story of one child who — like so many foster kids in Montana and across America — persevered through adversity in search of his family. Today, Mr. Antwone Fisher will allow us to use his life story as a lens to view the evolution of America's foster care system.

While there is still much work to be done, progress is being made. In 2002, more than 530,000 children lived in foster care across the nation. By 2011, that number dropped by more than 27 percent to just over 400,000. And this committee served a key role helping more kids find permanent homes.

In the past six years, this committee drafted two significant pieces of legislation that strengthened the nation's foster care system.

In 2008, Congress passed the Fostering Connections Act. This bill extended and expanded adoption incentive programs. This legislation helped connect children with families. It offered states the option to keep kids in foster care up to the age of 21 instead of 18. And it ensured that these kids can stay in their schools.

The law also required better coordination of health care services. It expanded opportunities for tribes to run child welfare systems. And it preserved family connections by keeping siblings together and promoting guardianship and adoption.

In 2011, Congress went one step further. We passed the Child and Family Services Innovation and Improvement Act. This law gave states more flexibility and the opportunity for innovation in child welfare by easing federal restrictions. In exchange, states must improve safety standards, prevent child abuse, and reduce foster care re-entry rates.

We will hear today how Ohio, the state where Mr. Fisher was in foster care, used this authority to revamp its system. We have made great strides to improve the lives of foster kids. But more must be done.

The Child Welfare League of America reports that one quarter of former foster kids become homeless after aging out of foster care. Some foster kids are simply dropped off at a bus stop on their 18th birthday and left to fend for themselves. The law now considers them “adults.” We must do more to prepare these kids for the reality of adulthood.

And we must do more to establish a permanent connection between foster kids and a positive role model. Nationwide more than 104,000 kids are waiting to be adopted. That’s down from more than 130,000 kids in 2007. In Montana, there are 460 kids waiting to be adopted, down from 600 kids in 2007. But that’s still 460 kids too many.

Federal Adoption Incentive Grants, which reward states for increasing adoption rates, can help reduce these numbers further. This committee has jurisdiction over these grants, which expire at the end of September. The grants play a vital role in connecting children with families and we should extend them.

We also should extend the 48 Family Connections Grants that expire at the end September. These grants help children in foster care reconnect with their own family members. We know that children placed with caregivers who are family, even extended family, are far better off.

A story about a boy named Brandon from Missoula, Montana illustrates this point. Brandon’s mother was a drug addict. His father was a convicted felon. Brandon spent his childhood in and out of foster care.

At the age of seven, Brandon’s mother abandoned him to his father, who was just released from prison. But Brandon’s father didn’t want him either and tried to send him back to his mother. Feeling unwanted by both parents, Brandon left his father and lived in shelters, group homes and eventually on the street.

A few nights before Christmas one year, Brandon spent the night out in the snow and almost froze to death. On Christmas Eve, when most families were together enjoying the holidays, Brandon was in the hospital recovering from hypothermia.

Today, thanks to the efforts of a special team in Montana dedicated to helping foster children find extended family members, Brandon has been reunited with his sister, brother, grandparents, and aunts, uncles and cousins. They love Brandon and have helped put his life back on track.

As this committee continues to work on legislation to improve the child welfare system, let us never forget Brandon's story. Let us never forget the hundreds of thousands of foster children like Brandon and Mr. Fisher who, with guidance and support from a caring adult, now have every opportunity to succeed in life. And let us never forget that every child should have the opportunity to grow up, as Churchill said, around family and home. That is where virtues are created, strengthened and maintained.

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