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United States Senate
Committee on Finance
Washington, DC 20510-6200

February 15, 2018

Dear Senators Hatch and Wyden:

I am a Parent Leader at Rise, an organization in New York City that supports parent advocacy in child welfare. I am writing in response to your letter to stakeholders, dated February 2, 2018, to represent the concerns of parents affected by the child welfare system. I specifically will address your question number 8, what human services efforts are effective in addressing the impact from opioid or other substance use disorders on children and families.

I started smoking crack in the 1980's, after I was hit by a drunk driver and became disabled. So many times after my addiction took hold I wanted to get help so my children could live a better life and fulfill their dreams. But I was afraid that child protection would take my children, and in time I did lose my children to foster care.

Opioid addiction has led states across the country to take more and more children into foster care, just like they did with crack. In Georgia, for example, the number of children in care has doubled. I'm tired of drug epidemics destroying families. The heroin epidemic took my two brothers at a young age. Because of my crack use, my youngest child was in the system for 5 years and my 2 middle children for 3 years.

I know there are people who think addicts can't be helped and don't want help, and that the best thing to do is to remove their children. But many parents do want help.

We need places where parents can safely call to find out what help is available. We need hotlines all across the country, like NYC Well here in New York, and we need to advertise those hotlines all over so people know about them.

We also need to invest more in programs where parents and children can go through the journey of rehab together. We need policies that tell parents, "As long as you keep doing what is best for you and your child, you don't have to be concerned about your child being removed." We need to do everything we can to help parents keep that bond.

We need programs to help children, too. Some children feel that their parent's addiction is their fault. Some children feel that getting high all the time is just a normal way of life. Everyone in the family needs help understanding why substance abuse is in their lives and how they can recover so the cycle doesn't repeat itself, like it did in my family.

In New York, we're lucky to have mother-child programs. But we need father-child programs, and programs for two parent families, as well.

I finally got the help I needed at a program run by people who'd experienced addiction and who understood what addiction is like. I also got my children home. Through counseling, we built and rebuilt our bonds. It's been 24 years and I've never used since.

Sincerely,

Robbyne Wiley
Parent Leader, Rise