

October 28, 2021

The Honorable Ron Wyden, Chairman
The Honorable Mike Crapo, Ranking Member
United States Senate Committee on Finance
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Wyden and Ranking Member Crapo:

Thank for your important bipartisan work to examine behavioral health care needs. We are very pleased to respond to your request for information on this critical matter.

Embrace Families Community Based Care (CBC) proudly serves as the state-designated lead agency for child welfare services in Orange, Osceola, and Seminole Counties in Florida. The organization works to prevent child abuse and neglect, to strengthen families, and to coordinate care for our community's children in foster care. Since 2004, Embrace Families CBC has designed a continuum of care which is family-centered, strengths-based, and community-driven.

Our goals are to ensure safety, provide permanency, and maintain the well-being of the children served by child welfare. Our preferred objective is to divert children from ever entering formal out-of-home care. However, we recognize this is not always possible and so we strive to improve outcomes for those children who must formally enter care.

Specifically, we are providing information on the following areas outlined in your September 21, 2021 letter: increasing integration, coordination, and access to care, ensuring parity between behavioral and physical health and improving access to behavioral health for children and young people.

We are specifically focused on the implication of these goals on children and youth in foster care. Since the Senate Finance Committee has a long history of bipartisan work to improve outcomes for children and youth in foster care, we are confident that the information we will provide will be useful for the Committee.

Embrace Families has recently initiated a national effort to provide children in foster care who receive Medicaid with a Child Welfare Oriented Health Plan.

Chairman Wyden and Ranking Member Crapo, as you know children who enter the foster care system experience sporadic behavioral health care. Children in foster care present with multiple complex psychological behavior and medical needs including depression and anxiety. Children in foster care are subject to numerous risk factors including toxic stress, poverty, racism and a lack of access to appropriate mental and behavioral health services.

Studies demonstrate a link between negative experiences during childhood and poor adult health outcomes. Timely access to effective behavioral healthcare and treatment services can help mitigate the health and behavioral impact of adverse childhood events.

Adverse health impacts for children who enter the foster care system often include:

- **Educational** and developmental delays
- **Chronic Conditions** – 20% struggle with chronic health conditions¹
- **Behavioral Health** – comprise 3% of population; utilize 15% of behavioral health services²
- **Sporadic Preventative Care**- placement changes and disruptions limit prevention efforts and ongoing medical care

General Medicaid plans, which are required for all children in foster care, are not designed to meet the more acute, specialized needs of children who have experienced abuse/neglect. Additionally, coordination of care is not a Medicaid benefit.

Lack of care coordination and continuity of care increases risk of adverse health outcomes for this vulnerable population. These outcomes can manifest in the overuse of psychotropic medications, which results in utilization of deeper end services such as ER and Inpatient hospital stays and higher healthcare and child welfare spending.

Several states (Florida, Georgia, and Texas) have developed a Child Welfare Specialty Plan designed to meet the higher health needs of foster children by outlining a child's unique social and medical issues, care coordination, and allowing families to have greater input on health decisions.

Florida's Child Welfare Specialty Plan demonstrates High Enrollee Satisfaction (CAHPS 2017)

- 90% satisfaction in health care
- 95% rating of personal doctor
- 98% timely access to care
- 98% positive communication with healthcare team

The benefits of a Child Welfare Specialty Plan include:

- Placement stability
- Duplication elimination
- Services streamlined
- Savings realized
- Better physical and mental health for foster youth

¹National Academy for State Health Policy, State Medicaid Managed Care Enrollment, 2017

² State Policy Advocacy and Reform Center, Medicaid, and Children in Foster Care, 2013

As part of the effort to make a difference for families and foster youth, Embrace Families respectfully requests that the Senate Finance Committee develop legislation that would promote the development of a Child Welfare Specialty Plan. Embrace Families is fully prepared to assist the Committee in undertaking this key child welfare behavioral health initiative.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sarah Nemes". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Sarah" and last name "Nemes" clearly legible.

Sarah Nemes
Interim Vice President of Public Affairs for Embrace Families