

**Testimony of Sandra Killett**

**The United States Senate Committee on Finance**

**"A Way Back Home: Preserving Families and  
Reducing the Need for Foster Care"**

**August 4, 2015**

Thank you Chairman Hatch, Ranking Member Wyden, and Members of the Committee for the invitation to be here today. My name is Sandra Killett, a mother who raised two sons, now 20 and 22 years of age. I reside in New York City and am currently the Executive Director of the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), which is an organization led by parents and youth affected and/or who had contact with the New York City child welfare protection system. Most of the staff and board of directors of CWOP are parents who have had children placed in foster care and now help other parents facing similar challenges. Prior to becoming the Executive Director, I served as the CWOP Board Chair and I also graduated from the CWOP Parent Leadership Academy in 2005.

Today, I am here to share insights gained from my own life experiences as a parent impacted by the child welfare protection system. I am also representing the perspectives of hundreds of other parents with whom I have worked when employed as a Parent Advocate by a New York social service agency and parents with whom I continue to connect with on a daily basis as the director of CWOP. Some of the parents are here in the room today and others are in various jurisdictions around the United States. Most of the parents here with me today are from New York City.

I plan to talk about gaps in service and also share some recommendations on how to improve services for biological families involved with the child protection system. My key themes are:

- Realigning child welfare dollars to support a broad array of community-based prevention and early intervention services to strengthen families and keep them safely together – if dollars are realigned to meet the immediate needs of families, we could reduce the numbers of children being removed from home and placed in foster care.
- Promoting a supportive, non-punitive approach to help families build on their protective factors while keeping their children at home.
- Partnering with parents to work with other families before, during or after involvement with child protection and the courts.

## **My Story**

I want to share a little about my story to help you better understand why I am urging you to act on these recommendations. I am a parent who has been affected by the child welfare protection system in New York City and this experience has forever changed my life and has traumatically impacted both of my sons, Tre and Tank.

As a single mother, I relocated to New York from Atlanta, Georgia with my two boys when they were young due to financial hardship. All of my family and supports were in New York. Their father travelled back and forth between New York and Atlanta to visit the boys, hoping that the move to New York was just temporary. This was difficult for my sons because they were very close with their dad and he loved them. My oldest son, Tre, became very distraught every time his father left New York to return to Atlanta. He began exhibiting aggressive behavior and angry outbursts as he got older. The angry outbursts towards me were later denied. Tre simply blamed me for his father not being in his life.

I sought help and support to deal with my family's challenges. My sons and I attended family counseling. This helped provide me with the tools to help my sons understand why I separated from their father, eventually resulting in divorce. During family therapy, I learned of Tre's need to have his own therapist for individual sessions. The therapist suggested that I seek an outside individual therapist, which would make my son confident that the therapist was on his side so he would hopefully open up and be truthful about his feelings concerning his dad and me. I tried to arrange individual therapy for Tre but I was placed on a waiting list.

Then I began to receive calls from the school about my son fighting and being disrespectful to his teachers. The school counselor helped me see the hurt that my son had experienced by his father not being emotionally or financially present and telling his sons that he was the only one who should be there for them as a father figure or a support to me.

I began to call every week to ask my therapist about expediting Tre's individual therapy. I was informed each time that I was still on a waiting list. Nothing became available within the month. We continued to have episodes at home. I became afraid of Tre, who was then 13-years-old. I was concerned about the safety of my youngest son who was 10. Tre would become so enraged that I would have to retreat with my youngest son to my bedroom. Eventually, I could not say anything to Tre without him threatening me.

I went into the local Office of Children's Services requesting assistance. I was informed that due to whatever my son told them about a scratch on his neck which he got from me grabbing him, I was going to be investigated for abuse. I had no idea what this really meant or how to respond to it. I was informed that both of my sons would be interviewed privately, without me present. Although I did not agree, I was told that I did not have a choice in the matter. The Child Protective Services (CPS) worker asked

me some questions which I thought were intrusive but nevertheless I answered them. None of the questions pertained to the reason I came to their office. All of the questions related to how I treated my children and how I disciplined them. Throughout this process, I was not concerned until my sons voluntarily told me the types of questions they were being asked and how they were being interviewed by the worker. When my sons answered the questions, the CPS worker guided them to "tell the truth about me beating them" but my sons were clear about the form of discipline they received. They explained that I would discipline them by taking away their favorite things, such as "no television" or "no play dates," etc. I was very angry and frustrated and definitely felt misunderstood by the child protection system.

At the end of the interrogation, I was told that someone would be visiting my home once or twice a week to monitor my family. The worker later concluded that I was not abusive or neglectful and I was not mistreating my children. The worker stated that I had everything in place to support my family. She acknowledged that my sons were healthy, they regularly attended school, had positive peer relationships and both had lots of involvement in social activities. In addition to having a loving and supportive extended family, we had stable community ties, including connections with the church, strong relationships with friends, positive school influences, and a wealth of resources and connections through my volunteer and activism work in community organizing for social justice. I now know that I had protective factors in place for my family which were a sign of stability and resilience. I continued to request services and was informed by the worker that the department didn't have the means to provide any home-based family counseling services or individual counseling.

Eventually my son and I had an altercation and Children's Services took him from my home and placed him in foster care. I was treated like a criminal. The prosecutor was trying to get a conviction and the family court was trying to take my youngest son away from me. I was in a state of shock. It was unacceptable to me that the situation with my son and me was being handled in such a negative manner. My younger son, Tank, became withdrawn and very sad. Not having his big brother at home was devastating for Tank. They were very close; we were very close. The foster care agency continued to say that I was the problem. My son did not receive any therapy while in foster care. I continued to receive therapy on my own.

If my family had received home-based family therapy, I believe we would have avoided the trauma of separation from the family and the development of a strained relationship between my two sons. We would have been working as a family through the crisis together. After all, isn't that what most families do who can afford to pay for the type of services that I was hoping would be provided to my family from the child welfare system? I would have been able to help my son go through experiences that an adolescent would go through at his age, such as asking a girl out on a date, researching colleges and helping him prepare for high school graduation. The simplest things were taken from me and my family - exploring his inner emotions and simply sharing all of

this with our entire family. We will never get that part of our lives back. However, we can move forward and make new memories.

Today, we are still healing as a family. My relationship with my son is off and on but we will work it out. He does not like to talk about his experience being in foster care. He knows that I never gave up on him and continued to advocate for him. Tre eventually returned home without incident but the ties and bond of mother and child and sibling will never be the same. He enjoys the fact that his little brother had the opportunity to go away to college and often states that he wished he had been a little more open to receiving my love and caring. He really thought I did not want him around. He thought the extended family did not want him around and he even had hostility towards his brother.

Tre really missed being a kid. The foster care system has a way of doing this to kids. He remained in foster care for one and one-half years before he was able to return home. Although it has taken some time, my son has started to feel like he belongs somewhere and that somewhere is with his family. Inside he knows, "I know my family loves me."

My family represents one of the thousands of families across the country in crisis and could have stayed together if we had been offered the right community services early in the process. If funding for home-based therapy and other supportive services had been available to help our family, it is very likely that my son might have remained at home and I would not be here talking to you today.

### **My Work as a Parent Advocate and Collaborator**

Today I do amazing work helping families organize and transform a very complex child protection system to a child welfare system. I work closely with social workers, parent advocates and other professionals that want to make a difference in the lives of families. By hearing my story and experiences, they are better able to learn how to engage families and understand how communication and the right resources can impact the lives of children in their own communities. It is through our collaborative work efforts that we can change laws to improve policies and practices for vulnerable children and families.

I have extensive experience in the New York nonprofit child welfare sector. I have educated parents about their rights and the processes to reunify with their families, acted as a family mediator and worked to organize and reform child welfare policies. In 2013, I was hired as the Executive Director of CWOP. I am a member of the New York Coalition for Child Welfare Finance Reform, which is a group of service providers and advocates who have collectively developed a set of principles for federal child welfare finance reform. I work with numerous advisory groups such as the Casey Family Programs Birth Parent Advisory Committee to help make systems reforms. Based on

our experiences, we have developed several ideas to improve child welfare policy and practice to help prevent child abuse and neglect and more effectively serve children, parents and families involved with the child welfare system. I am a founding member of the Birth Parent National Network, a dynamic national network of birth parents who work to educate policymakers and key stakeholders about the needs and gaps in services for child welfare involved families. I served on the Disproportionate Minority Representation Committee at the Bronx Family Court and Manhattan Family Court and I am continuing to volunteer with Community Voices Heard to address socioeconomic issues such as welfare, housing, education and employment for families involved with the child protection system.

I am very committed to reducing foster care placements and bringing the parent voice to the table to transform and shape future policies and practices in child protection to a child welfare system.

### **What Worked and What I Learned Through My Experiences**

Here are my recommendations based on what I learned through my own experiences, from talking with other parents all across the country and from reading as much as I can about policies and practices in this area.

- I. Realign child welfare dollars to support a broad array of community-based prevention and early intervention services to strengthen families and keep them safely together. If dollars are realigned to meet the immediate needs of families, we could reduce the numbers of children being removed from home and placed in foster care.**

I know from my own experience and working with other parents that many families who come in contact with the child welfare system could have avoided child welfare involvement with basic necessities, such as access to stable housing rather than shelters, quality child care and extended day care, and extracurricular activities to support an enriching experience for families who can barely meet their needs. There are serious gaps in services for many families. I could go on and on – there are so many services that can help families avoid contact with the child protection system. Some of the critical community-based services that families need include:

- Home visiting
- Early childhood and child care services
- Parent mentoring
- Parenting education
- Support groups
- Community Cafés
- Respite care
- Family resource centers

- School-based programs
- Programs for families affected by substance abuse
- Housing assistance
- Medical services
- Transportation
- Mental health treatment
- Counseling
- Employment training and job placement
- Differential response and other support programs
- Services specific to domestic violence

I do believe that if my family had been able to take advantage of preventive and early intervention community-based resources, my son would not have been placed in foster care. It is my belief that we need to shift our thinking from looking at foster care as a solution and instead focusing on strengthening families and keeping children at home.

There are new and innovative demonstration projects being funded through Title IV-E waivers in various jurisdictions, including New York City. This provides child welfare departments the flexibility to use some of their foster care dollars on other services to support and strengthen families. I, along with many other New York parents believe that the Title IV-E waiver funding would be most helpful to families if it were used to support prevention and early intervention programs such as Healthy Families and Visiting Nurse Programs.

## **II. Use a supportive non-punitive approach to help families at risk safely keep their children at home.**

I first learned about the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) through a very good colleague. I began to attend the CWOP Parent Self Help Support group and was moved by the many stories that parents shared about their struggles with the child protection system is when I first learned that I was not alone and that there were other parents dealing with similar challenges to mine. I later participated in the Parent Leadership Academy, graduated and became a Parent Advocate. I worked with other families – teaching and encouraging them to advocate for needed services for themselves and their children in order to reunify with their children as quickly as possible. I also encouraged families to exercise their rights as a parent. I have first-hand experience every day with families not having adequate legal representation, foster care agencies not honoring visiting schedules, or siblings missing out on visitations due to a lack of resources. There are so many different types of gaps. At CWOP we educate the community; we speak at various universities and public and private organizations and we mobilize parents to recommend policies and practices that promote positive and supportive approaches with families involved with the system. We need to ensure that parents who enter the child welfare system are treated with respect and that their

name is not placed in a record system for years. This type of record generally has negative effects and can potentially impede potential employment options for a family.

We need to educate our communities on how to help parents before they lose control. We need to raise more awareness about the everyday toxic stresses and challenges faced by many families and how to strengthen and build protective factors – this should be done in the same way that we currently focus on raising awareness about helping others who need help with substance abuse, critical illness and other health related issues. We need to develop educational campaigns and public service announcements to inform and educate the public and private sectors about the importance of building protective factors in families and communities and reducing risk factors.

Today I bring to you the voices of many parents who have forever been changed by the child welfare system. Most families live in very stressful environments facing everyday trauma based on their circumstances. Many are being penalized for living in conditions that are beyond their control. These families are also being told by CPS workers that they do not have the ability to protect their children in their own community. I believe that most parents want to be good parents but may need some help or assistance along with way.

### **III. Partner with parents to work with other families before, during or after involvement with the child welfare and court systems**

We need to engage parents as partners in child abuse reporting, investigations, service planning, delivery of services and evaluation.

Parent Partners (parents who have navigated the child protection systems), can effectively work with families to avoid entering the system. For parents already involved in the child protection system, parent partners can help parents effectively navigate all the services through child welfare, the public welfare system, courts, substance abuse treatment, housing, medical, vocational/educational systems to help families reunify successfully and more quickly with their children.

Parent partners can help build positive relationships and promote protective factors with families since they have similar life experiences and parents often seem to feel more comfortable talking with them. Parent partners can also help reduce obstacles for parents to complete their service plans so that parents can reunify more quickly with their children.

In conclusion, I ask you to take action to make sure ALL children at risk are protected by helping their families and communities build protective factors to ensure that children grow up in healthy, safe and nurturing homes.

Thank you for allowing me to share my own experience and the voices of many parents who struggle every day to do the best they can and be the best parents possible.

I welcome any questions that you may have.

Respectfully submitted,  
Sandra Killett