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Wyden Statement at Finance Hearing on Preserving Families and Reducing the Need for Foster Care

As Prepared for Delivery

This morning in America, there's likely to be a single mom with two kids, multiple part time jobs, and a big worry. She works long hours to provide for her family, but even then, it's a struggle to pay the bills and keep food on the table. And because her work schedule changes week to week, she's forced to leave her children unattended at times. A neighbor might place a concerned call to Child Protective Services. Once that happens, social workers have to choose between two bad options – breaking up the family, or doing nothing at all to help.

Here's why that needs to change. Whenever you ask anyone who has been through the child welfare system about what could have helped them the most, the answer is often, "helping my mom ... helping my dad ... helping my family." But that's just not in the cards when social service workers have nothing to offer but foster care.

Today, kids predominantly wind up in foster care because their families, like that single mom, are caught in terribly desperate circumstances that lead to neglect. Most youngsters in foster care aren't there because of physical or sexual abuse.

Maybe mom or dad needs help covering bills for a month, substance abuse treatment, or connections for child care. Oftentimes, a youngster's aunt, uncle, or grandparents could step up, especially if they have some assistance. In my judgement, every one of those avenues should be explored before breaking a family apart. In fact, it can save resources in the long-run without compromising on safety.

Back in the mid-1990s, there was a debate over whether sending kids to orphanages was the right idea. And I saw an opportunity for our child welfare policies to break into the enormous, untapped potential of kin. So I authored the Kinship Care Act, which said that immediate relatives -- aunts and uncles or grandparents -- who met the right standards would have first preference when it came to caring for a niece or nephew or grandchild. It became the first federal law of its kind.

Now in 2015, I see an opportunity for Congress to go even further in helping kids thrive with kin. It begins with letting states run with fresh policies that will support families when they've fallen on hard times. There's already proof that waiving states out of the old-fashioned federal system can produce results.

My home state of Oregon has a new strategy called Differential Response, which is all about recognizing that every kid and every family needs a different type of support. The old, two option system – foster

care or nothing – doesn't cut it, so Oregon is going to take a more tailored approach to help families out. The Finance Committee is extremely fortunate to have Chuck Nyby from the Oregon Department of Human Services here today to talk more about where our state's headed.

Strong families mean strong kids. That's the bottom line. And tomorrow, I'm going to introduce legislation called the Family Stability and Kinship Care Act that's built around that principle. The bill will help make sure that more states are able to adopt fresh strategies like Oregon's.

Now, to be clear, this is not in any way a condemnation of foster care. For a lot of kids, going into foster care is a life-saver. It means they're in a safe place where they can grow up and thrive. What this is about is giving kids the best possible chance to grow up in safe, healthy environments, and that often means keeping families together.

I want to thank Chairman Hatch for holding this hearing. He's done a lot of tremendous work on child welfare over the years on a bipartisan basis, and I'm looking forward very much to continuing our partnership.

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