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Hatch Statement at Finance Hearing on Foster Care Group Homes

WASHINGTON – Senate Finance Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) today delivered the following statement during a committee hearing exploring alternatives to help families and children reduce reliance on foster care group homes:

Robert Frost once wrote, “Home is the place, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Unfortunately, for too many children in our foster care system, that type of home is unavailable.

Today, the Senate Finance Committee will hear testimony on alternatives that can reduce the reliance on foster care group homes. I have been very pleased to have worked on this hearing with Ranking Member Wyden. This is a bipartisan hearing and I appreciate his efforts – as well as those of his staff – to make it so.

The basic premise of this hearing is simple: Whenever possible, children should grow up in a home with their family. When problems arise, attempts should be made to keep children safely at home. If a child cannot be kept safely at home, efforts should be made to place them with fit and willing relatives.

Children and youth should only be placed in group homes for short periods of time and only when efforts to place them in a safe family setting have been exhausted. Too many children and youth spend years isolated and confined in foster care group homes.

This past May, the committee held a hearing on the need to safely reduce reliance on foster care group homes. We heard powerful testimony from a former foster youth about her negative experiences in a foster care group home. The committee also heard testimony about how expensive, inappropriate, and ultimately detrimental placement in these homes can be for many children and youth.

I believe that we should do whatever we can to reduce the reliance on foster care group homes. There is a point when we should refuse to spend scarce taxpayer dollars to subsidize a placement that we know results in negative outcomes for children and youth. As I have said in the past, no one would support allowing states to use to federal taxpayer dollars to buy cigarettes for foster youth. In my view, continuing to use taxpayer dollars to fund long-term placements in foster care group homes is ultimately just as destructive.

However, it is not sound public policy to work to reduce the reliance on group homes without addressing the need to support a family placement for children and youth currently in or at risk of entering one of these facilities.

The purpose of this hearing is to examine alternatives to foster care group homes. Such alternatives include allowing states to use their federal foster care funds for the purpose of providing services and interventions that can result in allowing children to stay safely at home.

Currently, the federal government devotes the highest proportion of its federal foster care funding to the least desirable outcome for vulnerable families: removal of a child from his or her home and placing them in stranger care or in a foster care group home. Current federal foster care laws prohibit states from using certain federal funds to provide upfront services that could ameliorate harmful conditions in the family home.

Some states, like Utah, for example, believe that they can reduce the need for foster care if they use certain federal funds to provide front- and back-end services to families. In 2011, Chairman Baucus and I drafted legislation that allowed up to 30 states to get waivers in order to innovate and use their federal foster care dollars to provide these up-front services.

Today we will hear from an official from my state of Utah on how this flexibility has improved outcomes for children and families, reducing the reliance on foster care. I believe we should extrapolate from Utah's innovative HomeWorks initiative as a model for all states. When you ask a child who has been in foster care how we can best improve the current foster care system, often the answer will be: You could have helped my mom so that I did not have to go into foster care in the first place.

When a child cannot remain safely at home or assisting the parents to maintain guardianship is untenable, another alternative is to locate a fit and willing relative for the child. And, in recent years, Congress has taken some steps to increase these types of outcomes.

For example, in the landmark legislation, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, Congress allowed states to get federal reimbursement for certain kinship placements. And, under legislation enacted in the last Congress, states are now allowed to get federal incentives for increases in kinship placements.

In other words, Congress has strongly signaled to states that kinship placements should be a priority, but challenges still remain. Today we will hear about these barriers to kinship placement and suggestions to make these placements more prevalent.

I know that Senator Wyden is planning to introduce legislation which would allow federal funds to be used for services to help families stay safely together. I look forward to working with him and any other members of the committee on legislation that would reduce the reliance on foster care group homes and allow states to use their federal foster care dollars for these prevention services.

I hope to have a committee markup of this legislation in the fall. This hearing is part of a bipartisan process to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families. I hope that members will listen carefully to the testimony and policy recommendations presented here today.

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