

Testimony of Rafael J. López
Nominee for Commissioner
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
United States Department of Health and Human Services
Before the United States Senate Committee on Finance

April 23, 2015

Chairman Hatch, Ranking Member Wyden, Honorable Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to discuss my nomination to serve as the Commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families at the United States Department of Health and Human Services. It is an honor to have been nominated by President Obama for this role and to be considered by the United States Senate Committee on Finance.

This Committee has done extraordinary things for the American people. From expanding health insurance coverage to children through the Children's Health Insurance Program, to seeking normalcy for children in foster care, this Committee has left an enduring legacy on child and family policy in the United States. If confirmed, I look forward to working with each of you and your staffs toward our shared goals to protect and empower the nation's most vulnerable children, youth and families.

I hope you will indulge me as I thank the most important people in my life. I am grateful to my wife, Rosa Ramírez-López, my children Adán Miguel and Mateo Gabriel, my mother, María Concepción López, and all my friends and family here today, as well as those supporting me from afar.

Now, I'd like to tell you a piece of my family's story. My mother never finished the second grade in her rural town near Poncitlán, Jalisco, Mexico. She left school as a little girl to help support her family, cooking, sewing and cleaning in another family's home. She eventually followed her dad to the United States as a migrant farmworker and cannery worker, finally settling in Watsonville, California where I was born and raised. If you have ever eaten a Driscoll's strawberry, raspberry or blackberry, it is likely that it came from Watsonville. If you have ever sipped Martinelli's apple cider, then you've tasted my hometown. Leafy greens, vegetables, flowers, and fruits, are all grown and picked by the hands of farmworkers, just like my mother's.

But my mother wanted a different life for me, my sister and two brothers. Whether in the fields or the canneries, as a nanny, house cleaner, dishwasher or cook, my mother taught us the value of hard work. She taught us to sacrifice and to believe in yourself even when the odds are stacked against you. She is a survivor of a tough life, and our abusive father who she eventually left behind. As a family, we struggled to make ends meet even though we all worked so hard. There were nights when things became so violent that we would run to the homes of neighbors willing to take us in in the middle of the night. For years, I was embarrassed and ashamed at the

thought of strangers finding out just how much our family struggled. We were told by many that we needed to keep private matters “in the family.”

It took me years to realize that our family was not alone. And that is why I share a part of our family’s story with you here today. Alcoholism, abuse, mental health, violence and poverty are not private matters. They are public matters that cross geographic, class, racial and cultural boundaries. They are matters that require our best thinking, collective action and willingness to work together across political ideologies.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, on average, 24 people per minute are victims of rape, physical violence or stalking by an intimate partner in the United States-- more than 12 million women and men over the course of a year. This does not take into account the millions more children who are exposed to, or are victims of family violence.

Even in our darkest hours, my mother focused our attention on the future. And thanks to her unconquerable spirit and work ethic, she helped me become the first in our immediate family to graduate from high school. I became the first person in our family to graduate from college and the first to earn a graduate degree. I am the first person in my family to work for the President of the United States, and the first to testify before the United States Senate Committee on Finance.

I share all of this with you to honor my mother as the true hero that she is, and to enter a piece of our history into the public record. I tell you all this because we didn’t do it on our own. Neighbors, public school teachers, librarians, social workers, counselors, mentors and more. They all helped.

My commitment to public service was shaped by my early experiences, and has remained rooted in the belief that every child and every family deserves a fair opportunity to reach their God given potential regardless of the life or circumstances into which they are born. I was once a client of programs administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. While no one program is perfect, I know they change futures, because they changed my family’s.

As a Senior Policy Advisor in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and with the Domestic Policy Council, I work to improve the relationship between the Administration, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations to strengthen domestic social policies and programs. We rely on the best available data, science, technology and evidence-based interventions to promote the social and emotional well-being of children, youth and families.

With the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private, national philanthropy, I had the opportunity to help develop a brighter future for millions of children at risk of poor education, economic, social and health outcomes in the United States.

As the President and CEO of the Family League of Baltimore City, a nonprofit organization that creates public/private partnerships to improve the well-being of Baltimore’s children, youth and families, I helped launch several programs including the B’More for Healthy Babies initiative

which led to a 19% reduction in infant mortality in the first year. We worked with Maryland's Juvenile Court and negotiated a State of Maryland commitment to expand the Family Recovery Program where we focused on helping parents reunify with their court removed children by providing substance abuse treatment, mental health services and supportive housing.

As the Mayor's Executive Director of the City of Los Angeles Commission for Children, Youth and Their Families, we created safe passages for children and youth to get to school. We worked to align services and improve educational outcomes for 60,000 foster and probation youth in Los Angeles County.

As the founding Executive Director of First Five Santa Cruz County, we launched a first-ever universal health care program to serve all children 0-18 in the county.

In 1999, I became the youngest person to serve on the Watsonville City Council and was twice elected to represent the neighborhood into which I was born.

Public service has been my life. And I have worked hard to develop the skills, relationships, and experiences I need to be the most able champion of children, youth and families in need, regardless of the challenges they face, or the bureaucracy often standing between them and the help they need.

And at every step along the way, the use of data, science and results have driven my strategy. I have worked to build teams that value excellence, transparency and accountability. Whether engaging diverse partners to improve educational outcomes for our nation's foster children, or using tech solutions to hack our way to more efficient services for young people by using smart phones, I plan to bring whatever innovative tools and resources we can rally.

Whether helping the nation's LGBTQ runaway and homeless youth find loving homes who respect and accept them for who they are, or working to ensure that families receive the emergency shelter they deserve when fleeing from domestic violence, I will work tirelessly to engage the partners we need. I will be relentless in protecting the respect and dignity of those Americans who are in the greatest need.

April is National Child Abuse and Prevention Month. The work of raising our children and youth is the most important job in our country and it will take every one of us to renew our commitment to protect the safety and well-being of our children and youth, and the families that care for them. As a father of two boys, I can attest to the fact that it is the single hardest and most glorious job I have ever had. Our children, youth and families are our greatest renewable resources. When we respect, honor and invest in them, we invest in us.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Wyden, and Honorable Members of the Committee, thank you again for the invitation to speak with you today. I have never shied away from hard work. If confirmed, I am ready to roll up my sleeves and work with you. America's children, youth and families deserve nothing less.

With that, I would be pleased to answer your questions. Thank you.