

**TESTIMONY OF REBECCA JONES GASTON
BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON FINANCE
FEBRUARY 9, 2022**

Chairman Wyden, Ranking Member Crapo, Members of the Committee, thank you for considering my nomination to be the Commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families. I am honored by President Biden's decision to nominate me for this role, and, if confirmed, look forward to serving children, youth, and families under his and Secretary Becerra's leadership.

Before I begin my testimony, I would like to thank my family. Here with me today are my children's god mothers, friends who have become family. And watching virtually are my son and daughter, my mother and many of my family, friends, mentors, and colleagues. With me in spirit are my ancestors and my birth parents. I would not be here today without the love and support of all of these people.

I was adopted at a very young age after a number of foster care placements and grew up in a small Iowa farming community. Throughout my career in human services and child welfare, I have infused my lived experience, and the lived experience of others, into my work because I believe that those who have been served by children and family services systems should have a role in changing these systems.

If confirmed as the Commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, I would prioritize:

- shifting the focus of child welfare systems from placement to prevention by promoting cross-system partnerships and shared outcomes and helping states implement the Family First Prevention Services Act,
- leading from the ground up by keeping the perspective of states and those with lived experience at the fore, and
- ensuring equity and inclusion are at the center of all that we do.

I have been working in human services and child welfare for almost 25 years. During that time, I have transformed child welfare systems under both Democratic and Republican governors. I have worked across the nation to recruit foster and adoptive parents, have implemented innovative policies and programs, and have sat side-by-side with families and youth being served by these systems as a person with lived experience, and as a parent, advocate, and social worker.

As a result of my personal and professional experiences, I know that transforming children and family services systems into family wellbeing systems that serve children, youth, parents, and families as a whole cannot be done without collaborating with public and private partners, Tribal Nations, and community and faith-based partners, including those with diverse perspectives.

I currently serve as the Director of Child Welfare at the Oregon Department of Human Services. Together, with my leadership team and key community partners, we developed a strategic plan focused on wellbeing and prevention that has already yielded results. Despite the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have reduced the number of children in foster care by more than 20% over two years and are on the path toward long-term change.

I led similar change efforts as the head of the Social Services Administration in Maryland where I served under the leadership of Republican Governor Larry Hogan. In both Maryland and Oregon, I successfully led the states' Family First Prevention Services Act plans from development through federal approval. If confirmed, I will prioritize supporting states to fully implement this landmark law, so children, youth, and families do not have to wait any longer for the transformational change that it offers.

In addition to Family First, there are a number of other levers at the federal level to support states who are working hard to be innovative and improve how they meet the needs of children, youth, parents, and families. However, the key word here is *support* as it is also important for the federal government not to put up unnecessary barriers

Transforming children and family services systems into family wellbeing systems cannot be done without a focus on equity and inclusion. In these systems across the nation, we see disproportionality at every decision point. This impacts rural communities, communities of color, Tribal Nations, and other vulnerable communities. In these communities we often see limited access to services and resources, impacts of poverty, and disparate outcomes.

To build towards wellbeing, I have heard from those who have experienced the child welfare system that many families and youth could have been supported earlier by meeting needs related to homelessness, child care, and access to other concrete supports, such as addressing mental health and substance use needs. If confirmed, I look forward to continuing to be a voice for those who have experienced these systems and leading transformation to better meet their needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my work and vision with you today. I look forward to answering your questions.