



**Testimony of Steve Christian
Child Welfare Policy Advisor, Casey Family Programs
Nevada Legislative Committee on Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice
August 22, 2016**

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, good morning. My name is Steve Christian, and I am a child welfare policy advisor with Casey Family Programs, the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families across America.

Founded in 1966, Casey Family Programs has been analyzing, studying and informing best practices in child welfare for 50 years. We work with child welfare agencies in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, and with the federal government on child welfare policies and practices. We are a private provider of foster care and related services as well, serving 1,400 children and families each year through our field offices in Arizona, California, Idaho, Texas and Washington. We partner with child welfare systems, policymakers, families, community organizations, American Indian tribes and courts to support practices and policies that increase the safety and success of children, strengthen the resilience of families and create supportive communities that can help reduce the need for foster care.

I would like to thank the committee for inviting Casey Family Programs to participate in this hearing. We appreciate the opportunity to share our national expertise and experience around foster care and strengthening child welfare systems.

Casey Family Programs is committed to protecting children from abuse and neglect. We believe that keeping children safe does not require removing more children from their homes. Our goal is to ensure that more children grow up in safe, stable and supportive families. To accomplish this, we believe we must move beyond our current mindset and reimagine child welfare for the 21st century.

We base this approach on our belief that every child in America deserves a safe, stable and permanent family. Research shows that permanency and maintaining connections to family and culture are important for children to achieve better life outcomes. Foster care can be a necessary, temporary intervention for some children, but we should prioritize effective interventions to help families keep children safe at home.

Most children enter the child welfare system due to neglect-related issues, often as the result of parental mental health or substance abuse challenges. Foster care, therefore, is an intervention that takes place *after* a child has been mistreated. That is why it is so



important to focus on preventing the need for foster care in the first place by using approaches to help strengthen families before removal from the home becomes necessary.

The legislature can play a key role in moving child welfare forward by making it a policy priority to safely reduce the number of children who are placed in care and by providing the vision, oversight and resources to do so.

In Nevada, the rate of children entering foster care is trending upward. At 5.0 entries per 1,000 children in the general population in 2014, this entry rate is higher than the national average of 3.5 per 1,000 children. We believe that many children in out-of-home care today could be kept safely at home if a continuum of services and supports were available for families and if we could better engage families in service planning and delivery.

While a small number of children do need to be removed from their families for their own protection, it is important to recognize that removing a child from his or her home — even under such circumstances — is traumatic. Children do best in a nurturing and permanent family, and when the trauma of removal can be avoided. In addition, serving them at home is a less costly option for the state and counties.

In addition to engaging families in a continuum of services, a stable child welfare workforce is critical to improving outcomes for children and families. Child welfare workers need to be supported by adequate compensation, competent supervision, manageable caseloads and reduction of unnecessary paperwork. In addition, we need to team caseworkers with other professionals, such as nurses, early childhood specialists, substance abuse treatment workers and mental health counselors.

Aligning child welfare financing with the desired outcome of keeping children safe at home is also important. Reform of federal child welfare financing to expand support for prevention services has long been a goal of Casey Family Programs.

Legislation that would expand federal funding of services for families with children who are at risk of foster care placement is now pending in Congress. The Family First Prevention Services Act has passed the U.S. House of Representatives and is awaiting action in the Senate.

For children who must be removed from their home, it is critical that the focus be on getting them into permanent homes as quickly as possible. Timely permanency requires that Nevada's child welfare agencies and courts work closely together. The child welfare agency is responsible for developing case plans and for assisting families in accessing services to address the challenges that brought their children into care. The court is

responsible for providing oversight of the process and ultimately deciding on a child's permanent placement.

Recently, our Executive Vice President for Systems Improvement, Dr. David Sanders, co-chaired the federal Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities. The commission heard from CPS officials, pediatricians, law enforcement professionals and other stakeholders from across the country, and issued a comprehensive set of recommendations in March of this year.

The commission found that, to keep children safe, a system must have a comprehensive strategy that fosters a collective sense of responsibility for protecting children. This strategy must be backed by strong, coordinated leadership and accountability and must incorporate decisions about practice, policy and resource allocation that are based on the highest-quality data available. This comprehensive strategy should be outcome-focused, data-driven and multidisciplinary. It should also include active oversight by elected officials to stimulate improvements and, more importantly, to sustain them.

To this end, I commend the work of your committee. In addition to holding people accountable, your oversight reflects ongoing support for agencies to implement proven strategies.

Other key recommendations of the Commission include the following:

- First, focus on children at elevated risk of fatality. Children from birth to age 5, particularly infants, are the most vulnerable population.
- Second, require more cross-agency and cross-sector coordination. For example, we should require hospitals to also be responsible for child safety.
 - For newborns who meet risk criteria, health care professionals should collaborate with child welfare agencies to develop federally required plans to ensure these infants' safety and well-being following release from hospitals.
 - We also need to work together on opioid use, which has become a major challenge for Nevada and many other child welfare systems.
- Third, support data-sharing across the health care, education and law enforcement sectors for child protection. This can help anticipate harm to children not known to child protection agencies and help the agencies improve their response.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the following points:



- Make support of the child protection workforce a top priority. A strong and stable workforce is critical to the success of any strategy.
- Clearly define success. Oversight should be driven by meaningful and transparent outcomes that everyone is working toward.
- Examine what more can be done to stem the rate of entries into foster care. Slowing entries and a focus on timely permanency are the keys to reducing the number of children in out-of-home care.
- Finally, recognize that the child welfare agency can't do it alone. Most children in the system are served for neglect, and many are known to other departments and professionals, including those working in health, mental health, domestic violence, substance abuse and law enforcement.

Thank you for your attention and leadership in improving outcomes for children and families. Casey Family Programs would welcome the opportunity to be an ongoing resource to the Nevada legislature moving forward.



Testimony of Wanda Peña
Senior Director, Casey Family Programs
Nevada Legislative Committee on Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice
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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, my name is Wanda Peña and I am a senior director with Casey Family Programs. For the past five and a half years, my colleague Ron Murphy and I have been working with the State of Nevada Department of Health and Human Services, the Clark County Department of Family Services and the Washoe County Department of Social Services to improve outcomes for children and families in their child welfare systems.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide you with an overview of our current work efforts in the State of Nevada, with a particular emphasis on our work in Clark County. We are involved in a number of projects in Clark County, including the following:

- Providing consultation and technical assistance in support of the state's Title IV-E waiver, which was launched in Clark County on July 1, 2015. A IV-E waiver allows a state to use federal foster care funds for purposes other than foster care, including prevention, early intervention and family support services. Nevada's waiver is called Safe@Home and its purpose is to keep children who are at risk of foster care placement safely in their homes.

Clark County has contracted with private agencies to provide the following services:

- Coordination and development of in-home safety plans;
- Provision of safety services in the domains of behavioral management, crisis management, social and family connections, and resource support;
- Coordination with other services, both formal and informal, in the management of in-home safety plans;
- Training of agency staff in comprehensive safety management.

Evaluation of the waiver includes comparing outcomes for those families receiving waiver services to outcomes in families that do not receive such services. We anticipate that the waiver will produce a number of positive outcomes for children and families:

- A significant reduction in new substantiated investigations of maltreatment within 12 months of implementation of an in-home safety plan;
- A significant reduction in the number of children removed from home within 12 months after initiation of safety services;

- A significant increase in the number of families with documented progress toward improving their protective capacities;
- The elimination of safety threats to children, measured at 6 and 12 months after completion of in-home safety services;
- No further substantiated incidents of abuse or neglect in the home, measured at 12, 18 and 24 months after case closure.

As for the status of waiver implementation, Clark County has formed an external community advisory committee; rolled out the project to staff and providers; and formed an internal team to provide training, supervision, financial monitoring and data collection. In all, the waiver demonstrates high-quality safety-focused child protective casework. All IV-E waivers, including Nevada's, will end on September 30, 2019.

- Casey Family Programs is also involved in other child welfare systems improvement initiatives in Clark County. We are supporting the county's foster parent recruitment and retention efforts focused on developing a sense of community and mutual support among the fostering community. We are providing technical assistance regarding the sustainability of Permanency Roundtables, or PRTs. A permanency roundtable is a structured meeting intended to establish legal permanency for youth by involving internal and external experts (the PRT team). Our PRT efforts include identifying training resources, developing a pool of trained staff who can conduct Train-the-Trainer modules, and supporting Clark County to identify children for whom PRTs are appropriate, with particular emphasis on long-stayers in foster care.

In addition to our work in Clark County, we are providing technical assistance and support on several initiatives at both the state level and in Washoe County. We are working with the state Department of Health and Human Services on a number of projects, including the following:

- Implementation of KinGAP, a state/federal program that provides financial assistance to relatives who assume guardianship of children who would otherwise remain in foster care.
- Statewide spread of Differential Response, which provides for a more flexible, service-oriented response to reports of less serious child maltreatment.
- Implementation of Permanency Roundtables in rural counties of the state.

In Washoe County, Casey is supporting Early Family Solution Team meetings, which are meetings with families within 72 hours of placement of a child in foster care. Our assistance also includes financial support and technical assistance for Washoe County's Foster Parent-Birth Parent Mentors Program, which partners foster parents with birth parents to promote client engagement in services.



Finally, we are supporting Permanency Roundtables in Washoe County for youth freed for adoption with no identified adoptive family and those who are likely to age out of foster care.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present to the committee. Casey appreciates the opportunity to work with dedicated child welfare leaders at the state and county levels to improve outcomes for children and families. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.