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Legislative HB 893

I am a current foster and adoptive parent from Baltimore County. I would urge you to support HB 893, which allows foster, pre-adoptive, and kinship parents a seat at the table in court.

I am a single mother who works full time and have been a foster/adoptive parent for 12 years. In that time, I have cared for 25 children in my home. I adopted one child when she was 11 years old who had been with me for four years in foster care prior to the adoption. I am in the process of adopting a sibling group ages 15 and 8 from foster care. They have been with me since May of 2017. Many of the children who came into care in my home, left within 30 days to live with extended family but more than a few stayed for longer periods (over a year). For the children who stayed longer than a year I typically have planned to attend or attended the court hearings, if I was informed of the court dates (which isn't always the case).

Many people who hear that I am a foster parent say, "I could never do that. I would get too attached." I tell them that it is not about not getting attached. It is about loving these kids for as long as they are placed in your care. Does it hurt like hell when they leave? – yes, some more than others. The longer they stay, the more you get to know and love them for who they are and the more they become accustomed to life in your home and their new 'normal' – a safe, loving, caring and respectful home.

Please allow me to tell you why I believe you should pass HB 893. Let me tell you about M (leaving his name off for privacy), who was 3 years old and was wandering the street at 2AM during a rainstorm looking for his mother. He ended up at a grocery store where he thought his mother may have gone to buy cigarettes. His mother had mental health and drug abuse issues and claims to have left M in the care of someone at her home. However, M awoke in the middle of the night and found no one home and decided to go look for her. Thankfully someone cared enough to call the police and subsequently, M was placed in my home as a foster child.

On arrival in my home, within 30 minutes of arrival he was calling me Mom. At the time I thought it was a sign that he felt comfortable in my home but later, after hearing an educational session on attachment, I realized it was a sign that he did not know any difference – any woman could be Mom – that is, he was so traumatized in his few years on the earth, that he would easily attach to anyone.

M remained with me for 14 months while his mother attended family court and drug rehabilitation. During that time, I attended weekly therapy sessions with him seeing a the therapist he had seen prior to living with me. The therapist noted many improvements in his behavior during that time, a healthy attachment to me and contrasted how significantly better M's behavior was in the sessions since he was not with his mother. He also helped educate me on managing M's OCD-like behaviors e.g. prolonged screaming fits if a PopTart was broken upon removal from the package as it was no longer edible or wrinkles in the blanket at bedtime that made it impossible to sleep (no matter how smooth you made it, he wanted it to be fixed i.e. no wrinkles).

He had nightmares from his experience walking the street looking for his mom that night he came into care – it was not his 1st time in foster care either. He had been in another foster home prior to mine for many months before being returned home. The circumstances of his prior placement in foster care were not shared with me.

One night I heard his bedroom door open in the middle of the night and then before I could reach his bedroom he had run down the stairs and out of the front door looking for his mother – it was raining.

There were many wonderful things about this child that made it easy to love him through the sometimes stressful behavioral difficulties. M, my (then pre-adoptive) daughter, and I developed a strong bond in our 14 months together. In that time I surprised them with a trip to Disney, he learned how to ride a bike with out training wheels (he was so proud of himself), he was the star of the show during my daughter's sleepover, we went to the beach, he attended pre-school at the day care I use and his episodes of OCD were becoming less frequent.

In the meantime, I heard from his social worker and from his lawyer that they believed M should never be returned to his bio-mother (based on all they knew of the case – info to which I was not privy). I was told that I did not need to attend the CINA hearings as I would not be able to speak at them anyway. BUT, then decisions were being made that were not possible for me to keep. For example, as the mother was doing well in family court, the magistrate allowed M to have more visits. However, the magistrate ruled specifically the day of the week and time the visit would begin and end. The start time overlapped with when I regularly attended church with the kids and I was expected to drive him to the visit. Within a few weeks of having ordered these visits, there was another hearing - unplanned. The Magistrate determined to reward the mother with more time with M.

While on the outside this looks like how things should go, it did not take into account that this child is not a pawn in a game that you move about the board as you will. He is not a reward for Mom's better behavior. He is a child with real feelings, real night terrors and real attachment issues. A child who had now become very attached to my daughter and me. The magistrate, who either didn't know or was so far into his promises of returning this child to his mother (like a pawn) that he couldn't turn back, ordered the immediate return of the child to his mother – the same day as the unplanned hearing.

M had been with us for 14 months and now, literally within three hours, I had to have him ready to leave my home. I received the call while I was at work and it crushed me. It crushed me not only because it was so unexpected since no one agreed that returning him to his bio-mother was in his best interest, but this was also the most damaging way to send a child back to live with his mother. It did not consider attachments he had formed and was just unbearably cruel. [Not to mention that I had to leave work early, go get him from day care, tell him that he would not be living with us anymore (these people he had grown attached to and experienced life with for 14 months), tell my daughter that he was leaving AND pack all his belongings to move that very day. Then there was the ripping away of all the friends he played with at Day Care daily. I just have to believe that if the magistrate had had more information about M, had understood that he needed a transition plan and not to be ripped away from people and places where he felt safe, had understood about his attachment issues...well that he would not have issued this order in such a thoughtless manor. Had I, as M's foster parent, been permitted to advocate for M in court, I would have asked for a transition plan including weekend visits at my home and would have shared the reasons that it would have been more respectful of M's needs, thoughts and feeling as well as my daughter's and my place in M's life. It still would have hurt, but a transition plan ordered by the court would have considered M's needs as well as the mother's desire to have M back home.

Additionally, as a foster parent, I am not considered party to the case and am not given the opportunity to correct mis-information that may be presented in court or even look at documents that have been submitted. The kid's CASA, who sees and interacts with the kids far less that I do (maybe once a month), is able to see all the court documents, submit her own write up of the case and even speak on the kid's behalf in court. I am given 24/7 responsibility for the care of the foster children in my home. I should also be allowed to advocate for them in court as a party to the case.

I urge you to support HB 893.