

Support HB 930

Dear Mr. Chairman, Madam Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for reading my testimony of support for HB 930.

I worked for the Division of Child and Family Services in the State of Utah as a social service caseworker before moving to Maryland in 2004.

Luckily I was on the reunification end and not on the removal end, so normally my job was to try and help families create and follow through on plans to strengthen their family and prepare them to be reunified. I also had to work a plan B at the same time, in case reunification failed.

I remember my first few months on the job feeling overwhelmed that all of the sudden I was supposed to be the judge of what was normal. We went to lots of trainings and I feel like the Division of Child and Family Services did a lot of things right. Still, there was also so much space for error. And I felt like there wasn't consistency statewide. It felt like how someone's case went depended a lot on what team the caseworker came from and who their caseworker was.

Once the courts were involved it was more clear cut, but I feel like there was a lot of leeway in judgment calls before then. And even then, what I said as a caseworker for the Division of Child and Family Services seemed to carry a lot of weight with the judge. Almost every time that I went to court, the attorney general that represented the Division of Child and Family Services, and the Guardian Ad Litem, that represented the child that had been removed from the home, presented a unified front to the judge on what was in the best interest of the child. Some Guardian Ad Litem's were more diligent than others, but they also appeared to rely heavily on the information provided to them by the Division of Child and Family Services.

My words and the words of my colleagues had a lot of power.

Recognizing this has made me scared of social services ever since. Caseworkers have a very stressful job and they have a lot of power and probably not enough time (or possibly training) to do their job properly all of the time. There is definitely room for human error and personal biases known and unknown to come into play.

I didn't even realize it until someone else pointed it out to me, but even though Utah is a predominantly white state, (according to the census report I looked at in 2000, 95% of the population was white), at least half of the cases that I worked were with minority populations. And normally the cases where I did work with white families, those families were not members of the predominant religion in Utah. I did work with white people from the predominant religion, but they were typically foster care placements, kinship placements, or care providers.

I'm sure the statistics are a bit misleading as I worked in Salt Lake City and demographics are probably different for the city than what they are for the whole state. But there was clearly racial disparity. Personal biases, while probably unintended and not done consciously, must have come into play.

I worked with teams of people who all had the goal to help families and protect children. No one I know of wanted to break families apart. But somehow the families that came into the system were disproportionately from minority backgrounds.

I feel a sense of relief looking back that I wasn't part of the removal process, so I never made the decision to take a child away from their parents. But I can't say that I have personally managed to strip myself of unconscious biases, no matter how much I wish that were the case. And while I don't like to think about it and I like to think I am unbiased and love all people equally, it's possible that my personal biases made it take longer for families to reunite or were part of failures for families to reunites.

I worked with one black mother who lost her children due to a combination of parole violation and drug use. She was incarcerated as part of the process. And because she was incarcerated, the judge terminated any visitation rights she had with her children.

I visited her in prison, but it was hard for her to do a lot of the things she needed to do to get her children back while incarcerated. The day she got released from prison, she came to my office and asked if she could see her children. I told her she'd have to take it up with her defense attorney and get the court order changed.

That night she overdosed on heroin and died.

I don't know if she did drugs because she couldn't see her children or if she would have done them anyway.

But I do know that separating families brings pain to everyone involved and that we should do everything that we can to make sure that those separations are absolutely necessary to protect children from abuse and not due to any personal biases that someone may implicitly or unconsciously possess.

Thank you for reading my testimony.

I urge you to please support House Bill HB 930 to help protect all of our families.

Sincerely,

Julianne Bartholomew

District 12