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During Foster Care Awareness Month, Wyden Convenes Hearing on Successes, Roadblocks and New Opportunities to Keep Families Together *As Prepared for Delivery*

Over a decade ago, the Finance Committee decided it was time to do something to improve our nation's approach to foster care and help families stay together.

Back then, it was clear that there were two options: keeping a kid in a home where there were serious problems, or take them away from their family and place them in a foster home or an institutional setting where they often would end up more traumatized than they started off.

When late Chairman Hatch and I started our bipartisan work on foster care, we knew it was essential to create a third option to help kids and families: that became the basis for our Family First Prevention Services Act.

As the Committee meets today, we are six years removed from that bill becoming law, and it remains a top priority of mine and this committee to examine how this law is being used to improve the foster care system, and how states can better realize its full potential.

Family First centered around three priorities: prevention, strengthening kinship care, and ending the traumatizing practice of warehousing vulnerable kids.

Kinship care changed the status quo. Family First provided new funding to empower kinship caregivers – grandparents, aunts, uncles – to step in and care for kids, and make sure they have the help they need to provide a supportive and loving home.

I want to take a moment to thank the kinship caregivers in the room who made time out of their busy schedules to be with us today. And a big thanks to Generations United for supporting these wonderful caregivers here in the room and across today.

I'm glad to say that today we'll be hearing from kinship grandma Laurie Tapozada, of Rhode Island, who will share her firsthand experience being a caregiver before and after Family First, and how the law has improved her ability to care for her grandson after he was placed in her care back in 2015.

Family First funding allowed Laurie to give back to her community by creating new supports for kinship families, building the Kinship Advisory Council, and developing trainings for other families. As Laurie puts it, the landscape looks much different now, but we still have a long way to go.

Next up I'll touch on prevention. Sometimes, in order to prevent the need for foster care, mom and dad might need a little help. Maybe a parent needs mental health care or substance use disorder treatment, or parenting training and support, or maybe the family needs to do family therapy. Or maybe parents just need help meeting the family's basic needs. So under Family First, we created new federal funding for those services.

This Committee will hear today from David Reed from the Indiana Department of Child Services who will share how his state is implementing services like parenting classes, treatment for substance use disorder, and mental health care, and how these resources are helping keep families stay together.

And while the vast majority of states like my home state of Oregon, and Indiana, have submitted plans to use these new Family First prevention dollars, six years on, many states are still not taking full advantage of the funding available to them.

There are two big factors at play here: first, some states are not taking full advantage of getting help for kids. And second: many states that have asked for this funding, are being met with government roadblocks and red tape.

As a result, last year, the federal government spent just \$182 million on prevention services, while we spent over \$4 billion on traditional foster care. Clearly priorities are out of whack. The government can and must do better to get this funding out the door to states that ask for it.

The Committee is also joined today by Commissioner Jones Gaston, who heads up the Administration for Children, Youth and Families.

I look forward to hearing about her leadership on prevention, getting an explanation from her on why more prevention funds aren't making it out of the door, and how exactly the Administration for Children and Families plans to change course.

And finally, Family First worked to bring an end to the policy of warehousing vulnerable kids in large buildings that are more like prisons and leave kids more traumatized when they leave than they were when they entered.

There's no denying that foster youth struggling with mental health need a better support system, which is why under Family First, we created new requirements to get kids treatment and support and end the cycle of warehousing kids as a replacement for getting them the help they really need.

Warehousing kids instead of helping set them up for success is lazy policy, and leads to worse outcomes for kids.

And let me be clear: anyone attempting to roll back the clock on these protections against warehousing kids are trampling on Orrin Hatch's legacy and will have to go through me.

There is no question that more must be done to meet the needs of kids in the foster care system who have mental health challenges.

As Chair of this Committee, I've been using every tool at my disposal to address the ongoing youth mental health crisis and ensure young people are able to get the help they need, where and when they need it, but I think we can all agree that a good place to start is making sure kids can remain with their families whenever possible.

We made the Family First Prevention Services Act a reality six years ago, and we have come a long way, but we still have work to do to realize the full potential of this law and how it can help kids and families, and I'll continue my work to oversee its implementation.

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