

Opening Statement

Bryan Samuels

Nominee to be Commissioner for the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Senate Committee on Finance

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, my name is Bryan Samuels. It is an honor for me to appear before you as President Obama's nominee to be Commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families. I'm also honored to come before this particular Committee for confirmation because of your long commitment to improving the quality of life for children and youth placed in the child welfare system. I want to assure you that I share your commitment to serving our nation's most vulnerable children and youth.

If confirmed, I will bring more than 20 years of experience working at the state and local levels to promote the social and emotional well-being of children and families. I have worked to build systems that promote proven results for children that have been adopted and youth in foster care, runaway youth, youth in juvenile detention, childhood victims of trauma and exposure to violence, and those struggling with academic achievement.

I have spent my career focused on cost-effective service strategies and streamlined operations in large government organizations on behalf of children, youth, and families. My commitment to public service is largely motivated by my own childhood experience of spending eleven and half years in a residential school for disadvantaged children. This experience helped shape my commitment to serve high-risk children like me, and it continues to reinforce my belief that dedicated people and well-designed programs can have a dramatic and positive impact on the lives of vulnerable youth. I believe that we need to build public systems that are more concerned about the long-term results for children, than they are with meeting minimal standards and requirements.

During my career, I have been Chief of Staff for Chicago Public Schools, Director of Child Welfare for the State of Illinois, Deputy Director of the Department of Social Services for State of Nebraska, and Assistant to the Governor for Human Services for the State of Illinois. I also taught at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration for seven years. I hold a Master's Degree from the University of Chicago, Harris School of Public Policy Studies and a Bachelor's of Arts Degree from the University of Notre Dame.

My academic training as well as my experience leads me to a strong belief in the use of data, research, and evidence-based interventions to guide policy decisions. In my most recent leadership roles, I have been responsible for addressing some of the most

intransigent issues facing our children and youth through implementing the best practices I could find, based on research.

Given that the Children's Bureau is responsible for "supporting and encouraging services that prevent or remedy the effects of abuse and/or neglect of children and youth," I hope to draw on my experience as the Director of the nation's third-largest child welfare agency with 16,500 children in custody, 10,000 public/private employees, and a budget of \$1.3 billion. My record provides some insight into how I will approach my job as Commissioner. While Director of DCFS, I worked with a team of committed public servants to:

- reduce caseload ratios in the public and private sectors from 20 cases per worker to 14 cases per worker;
- continue to decrease child welfare population from 20,500 to 16,500 statewide;
- reduce number of youth "on run" by 40%, decrease the number of days "on run" by 50%;
- decrease the use of residential treatment or group home care by 20%;
- reduce number of past due child protection investigations by 60%; and
- decrease distance between home of origin and foster care placement from 20 miles to 7.8 using new school placement protocol.

If confirmed, my first priority as Commissioner will be to ensure effective implementation of Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, which I know this Committee was instrumental in enacting. I believe successful implementation of the Act will provide a valuable opportunity to improve the child welfare system's focus on child and family well-being – the long-term measure of success – as well as on the safety of children. The comprehensive nature of the Act gives me great confidence that we can do more to ensure that the children in the system have better lifetime outcomes.

Because of my most recent experience for two and half years as Chief of Staff for the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), I'm particularly interested in the Act's provisions that address improving educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care. There is no denying that education is a cornerstone of future economic success. For foster youth, I believe successful completion of high school also provides a vital, positive counterweight to the abuse, neglect, separation, and impermanence they have experienced. The Fostering Connections Act makes improving educational outcomes a focal point for all the child welfare agencies – an example of focusing on the long-term outcomes for children. I will also work to ensure effective implementation of the Act's kinship guardianship and tribal IV-E initiatives, which I know are priorities for many members of the Committee.

My second priority, after successful guidance for Fostering Connections, is to work with the members of this Committee to expand the availability and use of interventions that draw upon the latest research on the trauma these children have experienced. There is a growing body of literature that shows dramatically how trauma and violence disrupts healthy development. A powerful place to begin is the longitudinal research on adverse

childhood experiences (ACEs). The study found that individuals with more than four of these ACEs were 2 times as likely to smoke cigarettes, over 4 times as likely to experience depression, 12 times as likely to attempt suicide, nearly 5 times as likely to use illegal drugs, 10 times as likely to have injected drugs, 2.5 times as likely to contract a sexually transmitted disease, and 7 times as likely to abuse alcohol. Despite the truism that “time heals all,” these studies show that time alone does not heal childhood trauma.

Many of the children and youth served through funding the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) have had traumatic experiences that place them at high risk for these debilitating conditions. FYSB can play an important role in supporting the development of evidence-based policies and strategies that promote positive development for these high-risk children and youth.

Finally, my third priority is to focus on strengthening families and preventing adverse experiences in the first place. As the Child Welfare Director in Illinois, I learned first-hand that putting families back together after a prolonged separation is difficult work for everyone involved. As a 2009 report from the Institute for Medicine stated, “The most effective approach to reducing the effects of maltreatment is to prevent its occurrence. Because of the pervasive mental, emotional, and behavioral problems for which maltreated children are at risk, programs that prevent abuse have the potential to avert multiple disorders and promote healthy development across multiple domains of functioning.”

Rigorous research shows that building key “protective factors” with families reduces the likelihood of child maltreatment and increases the health and well being of children at the same time. The five protective factors in use across multiple agencies in more than half the states are:

- Promoting parental resilience,
- facilitating social connections,
- enhancing knowledge of parenting and child development,
- ensuring children’s social and emotional development, and
- providing concrete support in times of need.

These attributes serve as buffers, helping parents who might otherwise be at risk of abusing or neglecting their children to instead, find resources, supports, or learn coping strategies that allow them to parent effectively, even under stress. In most cases, this does not require a host of new programs as much as it requires integrating empirically supported elements into programs and systems that are already funded through the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Grassley, and Members of the Committee, I believe I’m well prepared to lead the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families. Again, I will build on the most rigorous science currently available, track the results we are getting, and focus relentlessly on better lifetime outcomes for children and youth.

If confirmed, I look forward to working with the members of this Committee to improve the lifetime outcomes for this nation's most vulnerable children, youth, and families.
Thank you.