

**Statement of Isha “Charlie” McNeely
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United States Senate Committee on Finance**

**Hearing on Innovations in Child Welfare Waivers:
Starting on the Pathway to Reform**

Thursday, March 10, 2011

Chairman Baucus, Ranking Member Hatch, and Members of the Senate Committee on Finance, I thank you for inviting me to come here today to share my story.

My name is Charlie McNeely, and I am a 24-year-old alumni of the Oregon foster care system. I'm here to talk to you today about a simple word that carries big meaning for myself and so many youth in foster care: connections. This word holds so much value because it relays the importance of relationships and how important connections are to a foster youth. Connections help to define us outside of foster care, to not think of ourselves as being only “a foster child.”

I'd like to tell you how my connections — or rather, disconnections — played a recurring theme in my foster care story.

Connection to parents

I was placed into foster care at three years old along with my four other siblings because both of my parents were drug abusers. At that young of age, I really did not know what was going on. Looking back, I wonder if the state could have made the process a lot less traumatic and prevented my siblings and I from staying in care all of our youth years and from be separated.

I think it would have been helpful for the state to provide services that would have helped my parents overcome their addictions. When I was placed into foster care, the amount of contact I had with them was really limited. Not being able to see my parents felt like an emotional punishment, and I don't think it really helped the problem.

I truly believe my parents never wanted to be on drugs, but they fell victim to their environment. They are both clean from substances, and have been for a few years now. I just wish they would have had help available to them before or during the time we were taken from them.

Today, my relationship with my parents is moving in a positive direction. I see my mother regularly, and we are getting to know each other and deciding what type of relationship we want, what works within both of our comfort zones. But it's really hard to re-establish a lost relationship with a parent, and I think foster care could have better helped me and my siblings maintain a connection to our parents, and maybe have prevented us from becoming disconnected in the first place.

Connection to relatives

Since being placed in foster care, I have met uncles, aunts and cousins that felt they only had one option or none — to take on parenting of my siblings, and me or to stay away. I wish that my foster parents and other state workers were more active and willing to make an effort to keep me and my siblings connected with family, with supports that would keep us safe so we could get together and stay familiarized with each other.

I think it is important for the state to also take the time to contact extended relatives to see if they can act as a resource for their young family members in care. In the case of my siblings, and me my grandmother and aunt were not in a position to care for all five of us, but they could have been a resource in helping my siblings and I stay connected. They were left out of the loop, and I've learned they were not informed about their options or if they had any. I think the state should keep in mind that removing children from their homes is removing them from a whole family network, and that a young person's identity and what they know (their history) goes with that. I hope the state will look at things from this perspective, and come to understand that there are more pieces to the puzzle than just the children and their parents.

I've discovered that most foster youth, like myself, end up re-establishing relationships with biological relatives, often reconnecting with their biological parents. I've learned this isn't only true for me, but through a summer internship with FosterClub and other advocacy work I have done, I was able to see this as a common theme among foster youth, especially those who transition out of care. Most of us go back and try to find our families regardless of whether or not it is safe for us to try and reconnect.

Since it's clear that young people are likely to reconnect with birth family members — whether they've aged out of the system, lived with kin, or even been adopted — the system should provide services that help foster youth stay connected with their biological family and build healthy relationships while they have the support and safety net of foster care.

Connection to the outside world

Some of my most difficult and disconnected periods in foster care were my stays in a group home and congregate care facilities. Being in these facilities and that environment was very damaging because I felt like I was being punished, locked away — and the consequence was not being able to see my siblings.

Many times I was confused about why I was put into these facilities, which ranged from group homes to homeless shelters to lockdown facilities, because I did nothing to deserve to be placed in these environments. The state had limited places for a teenage female in foster care to go, so they have to place foster youth in a group home or a congregate care facility. Since these places are usually meant for at-risk foster youth that may need more constant and direct supervision, they are set up to give you very limited freedom. I experienced restrictions on telephoning my siblings or friends and getting on the Internet. It often felt like I had lost all contact with the outside world. I remember having to earn phone privileges and minutes to be able to talk to my siblings on the phone. One difficult challenge of group homes is that sometimes you can no longer attend regular school, and the only academic learning environment available was whatever the facility had set-up to teach the residence. For me, this meant being cut off from friends,

peers and other meaningful relationships. My grades suffered during my freshman and sophomore years of high school because of the less-than-adequate education I received when I was pulled out of public school. In addition, being pulled from public school meant I had no outside contact unless it was with a caseworker or state-approved in advance.

Connection to “normal” activities

It is very important that foster youth are supported and given opportunities to do school and outside activities. From my personal experiences and working as an intern for Foster Club, I was surprised to know of so many youth that missed out on school functions, activities and just being a youth. I think that alone will definitely improve a youth’s stay while in care because they will still be able to be a kid and carefree in a sense. It will help them to not feel isolated and to build friendships and become more confident in themselves and their situation.

Whether limitations on a foster youth’s participation in extra-curricular activities is due to transportation, cost, or a young person’s lack of awareness about how they can be involved in their school and communities, the foster care system must do a better job to normalize childhood for young people like me.

These types of activities provide opportunities to connect with supportive adults and peers, providing us with an opportunity to connect with supportive adults in our community, build healthy relationships, and to ultimately find permanence. With these connections, when a youth exit or starts the transition of leaving foster care, the bridges already exist and young people will feel secure in their relationships and empowered to becoming a successful young adult.

Connection to siblings

One of the most difficult disconnections in foster care was in the relationships with my siblings. While I was in group home, I did not have a foster parent or family members available to help me advocate to see my brothers and sisters. Perhaps, if stronger connections to my family had been maintained, we could have stayed over at their homes on weekends or for outings so we could visit in an informal and unforced way. I wish my caseworkers that worked on my behalf had the time to do this type of important work – to help me to stay connected to siblings.

As the second oldest child in my family, I was one of the first to experience the setbacks and hardships of transitioning out of care. When I transitioned out, I lost all of my health care benefits and had no idea of what permanency was or how to find it. I was determined to not be a statistic so I worked hard, stayed in school and kept a job to ensure that I would become a successful and contributing adult. I was also determined to help my younger brothers avoid the hardships I endured. Now, as a young adult, I find myself caring for my younger brother who is 17. I was also guardian of two other siblings at one point, my younger brother who is now 21 and just exited the foster care system this summer and my sister who is twenty and is now happily married with her first child.

For the most part, I feel like I am all the support my siblings have. I naturally want to be there for them,

but it is not easy. Even though I have traveled down a similar road, I do not have all the answers and sometimes I just feel like I am not able to help them.

I would like to see more services in place, so when a sibling or relative becomes a caregiver, there is support to make the youth's transition from foster care a lot smoother than my own. So far, I have been just falling into the pitfalls –and then working to find my way back out. Because my family was broken, I don't have a strong reference about how good parenting looks. Since my brother is still transitioning out of care, he can go to the state for certain things — but I feel our family needs counseling services to help us overcome all that we've endured, and to patch our disconnection. It would be helpful because it would allow us to come up with solutions and goals as a group, allowing us all to know exactly what is needed to ensure we become successful and that our relationship stays healthy and positive. While I feel I have some permanence by becoming a caregiver for my siblings, I fear that I lack the support that I need to help them with the struggles they face as at-risk youth, including incarceration, crisis situations, behavior and mental issues, could once again disconnect us.

Today, I work for the Immigrant and Refugee Center of Organization at Lent Elementary School. I am a member of the Oregon Foster Youth Connection, a foster youth advisory group. I will be graduating from Portland State University next year, earning dual degrees in public and community health. I plan to continue on and receive a master's degree in social work.

While I am proud of my success, I am still working on re-establishing, or creating, the connections that were broken or lost while I was in foster care. Part of this process has led me to try to be a voice for those who are having similar experiences and feel like they are not being heard. I feel like my story as a foster youth, and now as a passionate advocate for my siblings and others, will empower young people to go out and be heard, to change policies and implement ones that will contribute to their success.

I recognize and thank you for recent Federal legislation like the Fostering Connections to Success and Increased Adoptions Act, which will improve things for many of my peers coming through the system behind me. I ask, as you continue to consider how to improve the foster care system, you think about connections and how important they are for foster youth: connections to biological parents and relatives, to siblings, to the outside world and to the normalcy we strive for.

Thank you, Chairman Baucus, Senator Hatch, and Committee members, for inviting me to testify and hearing my story and perspective about how to improve foster care for young people like me.