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CUTTING EDGE PRACTICES IN FAMILY FINDING
TESTIMONY BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
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Chairman Baucus, Ranking Member Hatch, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the invitation to appear in front of this esteemed committee. I want to start by thanking my wife Nicole Houston, daughters Calli, Riley and Lilli and son Finn Campbell for the countless sacrifices they have made to support my passion to find and engage the parents and relatives of children in America's child welfare system. I am humbled by the realization that I simply could not be here without the support of my family. This brings up the importance of today's hearing. In 2013, we continue to provide services that too often have the unintended consequence of sending older youth into adulthood without what we know to be essential to safety and health – membership in a family and a community of love and support.

The Senate showed extraordinary leadership and vision when they enacted the Fostering Connections to Success Act of 2008 requiring notification of relatives within the first 30 days of a child's removal from their home. This leadership combined with the advent of improved technology and innovative practices such as Seneca Search Services can produce powerful results. As I was preparing for today's hearing I was able to identify 62 of Mr. Fisher's relatives within 10 minutes and at a cost of \$15.00. Imagine how different Mr. Fisher's childhood and transition to adulthood could have been if we had been able to locate and activate his family to participate in planning and making decisions for his future. The more than 10,000 youth in foster care I have assisted through searching have provided many lessons about what is possible in families. I have learned that while a birth parent may struggle with challenges that make caring for and protecting their children difficult, they often have family members who could be supports. Several years ago, in fact, a relative I located for a child in care 10 years was a sitting US Senator who had never been notified by the state of the child's need.

Given the importance of the mandated notification process, the question becomes what happens to family members and caring adults who are notified and immediately respond to the urgent need of children entering care. The cutting edge practices that engage families to actively participate in the decision making and support of their kin have dramatically improved the well-being and permanency outcomes of children who have come to the attention of child welfare services. Efforts like those in San Francisco, Oregon, and Minnesota are leveraging Family Connections grants to refine, measure and test innovative, front-end practices that will help us further understand the full potential of this work to inform the field. Unfortunately, these practices are too infrequently available or unevenly implemented for families in need, thus squandering the opportunities created by The Fostering Connections to Success Act in far too many communities.

One method to bridge this gap is to change the hearts and minds of those who practice, supervise and authorize the rigorous, challenging and often painful work with families in distress. Families are larger than we realize and contain many untapped resources. Families also experience incredible grief when a child has been removed from their home and the family has been prevented from having a voice in the fate of their family member. We need training that promotes valuing the power of family and their participation in the process. This can prompt a culture change in the work environment to see family members as essential assets in minimizing the trauma experienced by vulnerable children. We can address this need right now by using existing Title IV-E training dollars to establish a national center that systemically approaches every jurisdiction in the country to install these practices of engaging families and involving them meaningfully in these children's lives. We need a systemic approach to encourage the states to implement these practices across the country and believe this is an evolutionary, if not revolutionary, way of changing the nature of outcomes for children and youth in the child welfare system. At the very least, we could begin by strengthening the legislation by adding an enforcement clause and reporting requirements.

I want to thank Seneca Family of Agencies and Ken Berrick for their unwavering support and partnership. Without this support, the effort called Family Finding would not have been possible. I would like to conclude my testimony with a brief story and a quote. I was recently training in New York City and one of the staff from the agency walked up and said "I want to thank you." I said "You're welcome, but why?" She said, "My husband and I had been working on adoption and were getting matched to children here in New York City with Children's Services. Around the same time we received a letter in the mail from South Dakota. It turns out we had a niece and nephew in the system there that we didn't know about. We just finalized their adoption!" Then she continued, "My husband and I are going on to adopt some children from New York City Children's Services as well." It does not get any better than that and points to the benefits of this landmark legislation.

Finally, in closing, Martin Luther King Jr. penned the following in "Letter from Birmingham Jail": "Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust." I would like to leave you with this thought as you consider the future of the Adoption Incentives Programs and Family Connections Grants. Meaningful, life-long connection to family is the single factor most closely associated with positive outcomes for children. We can begin today to take the next steps to ensure Mr. Fisher's story does not happen to another child in our care.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to speak with you today.