

**Statement of Rosalina Burton
Former Foster Youth, California
U.S. Senate Committee on Finance**

**A Way Back Home:
Preserving Families and Reducing the Need for Foster Care
Aug 4, 2015**

Chairman Hatch, Ranking Member Wyden, and Members of the Senate Committee on Finance, thank you for inviting me to share my story and talk about some of the issues that I know affect many young people in foster care.

My name is Rosalina Harmony Burton. I am 23 years old, a current intern with FosterClub, and a mental health worker at San Pasqual Academy, a residential facility for foster youth in Escondido, California.

Before I worked at San Pasqual Academy, however, I was one of their clients for fourteen months. I spent most of my childhood in the San Diego County foster care system. I was in and out of foster care for twelve years during which time I experienced more than twenty-three different placements.

The most memorable of these placements being kinship care with my great aunt with whom I spent over a year and half with. This length of my placement was due in part to my large family but greatly affected by my stability, because my placement was incredibly stable I was the last of seven children to return home. At this time, I was three and my mother was pregnant with her eighth and final child; I was her fourth. We were removed from our parents' care for the first time after my mother went away to receive treatment for her addiction, and my father was reported for neglect. My six siblings and I were taken to an emergency shelter before subsequently being placed in kinship care, one of my sisters and I was placed with our paternal great aunt. If I close my eyes I can still picture the layout of her house, the pattern of my sister's and I's matching bed sets on our first, very own beds, and smell breakfast cooking as I rose for our set morning routine. Yes, my great aunt was a prepared women and living with her gave me a sense of stability, love and normalcy that I, unfortunately, never experienced again. Eventually, all of my siblings and I were reunified with my parents who relapsed on drugs shortly after.

Over the next several years, my siblings and I would re-enter foster care, some of them less or more times than I, each after failed reunifications with our parents. At some point, we all just began to have different cases and different social workers. Things got really confusing. We no longer went to the same court dates, or had the same permanency plans.

Looking back, I can't help to wonder if my experience in foster care – and the impact it would have on my siblings and I - would have been different had I lived with relatives.

At no point, during any of my re-entries into foster care, was kinship care brought up as an option again. Despite the fact that my paternal great aunt, the one I lived with during my first foster care placement, had made it clear to me, my parents and our caseworker that she wished to adopt me. I understand there may have been circumstances that I was not aware of, but it was never explained to me nor does it make sense that kinship placement with my aunt or any one of my relatives would have been ruled out. I come from a big family. I am one of eight, and we are part of an even bigger extended family: my father is one of nine.

I often wonder if these relatives being on my father's side, including my great aunt I mentioned had something to do with why we were never placed in kinship care throughout our multiple re-entries into foster care. This is important to mention because kinship care is the preferred option when available and lineage should not be a barrier. While I was in kinship care, I saw my siblings and parents regularly as was prescribed by the court. I felt close to them and desired their presence in my life, but after we were scattered throughout foster and group homes, our close-knit sibling group became strangers to each other. At first, I enjoyed this reprieve because seven siblings meant always having to share everything. Unfortunately, I did not realize the damaging effect the long gaps between seeing my siblings was having on our relationships. Now as young adults, we realize that different nurturing experiences have shaped us to be completely different people with no history to hone in on when issues come up. Before entering care, my siblings and I took care of each other because we had to - we were forced to bond due to close proximity. Once our environment changed, bonding became optional and that history obsolete. By the time I was thirteen, I often worried if one of my siblings passed not having anything to say at their funeral because I didn't even know what their favorite ice cream was, better yet who they were. Memories are an essential part of staying connected to your siblings in adulthood and youth with strong sibling connections are proven to have better outcomes. When there is no history there is nothing to miss and when there is nothing miss it becomes extremely hard to rationalize why you should try to have a relationship with someone who has nothing in common but DNA. Relationships are hard, and even harder for those who have experienced relationship loss due to foster care; we must do better for sibling relationships. I would like to share with you what I know about my siblings.

My eldest sister, the first born of our sibling group, emancipated out of foster care at the age of sixteen. I don't believe that was a healthy choice, but at the time reunification with my mother was not an option. She just wanted out of the foster care system. She received her GED before exiting care, and now lives with my mother. Unfortunately, she continues, as she did then, to struggle with addiction.

My eldest brother, and the second born, found stability during his third entry into care with a school friend and their family. Our father's parental rights were terminated and our mother voluntarily signed away her rights after my brother found stability. He aged out of foster care with this family and continues to have a close relationship with them. He is a UCLA graduate, volunteered for AmeriCorps and was recently offered a job as a campaign manager.

My Eldest sister, and the third born, parental rights were terminated for my father. My sister found stability during her second time entering foster care with a family from church. Although she exited and reentered care multiple times due to failed reunification efforts, this foster family became a constant and she aged out while in their care at eighteen. She graduated high school and recently reenrolled in community college.

I, the fourth child, had my father's rights terminated after a failed reunification at thirteen years old. Within six months of entering his care, we became homeless. I was then reunified with my mother at fifteen while she was in a homeless shelter. I often slept at friends' houses and skipped or missed school regularly. Living at home felt like I was walking on eggshells due to my mother's illness, and an environment, I did not feel safe in. I reentered foster care no more than a year after living with her. Shortly after I fought for my mother's rights to be terminated because I was done with failed reunifications. I emancipated at the age of nineteen, received my high school diploma and have been employed full-time ever since. Last semester, I returned to college after taking time to work on my mental health.

Within a year of leaving my mother's care and entering foster care, my younger sister, the fifth born, tried to make things work with my mother by entering a teenage homeless shelter down the street from the shelter my mother stayed in. For reasons I am not aware of this failed. She reentered foster care but I do not believe my mother's parental rights were terminated. She became pregnant at seventeen and aged out of care at eighteen. Now, she has two children and struggles to maintain stability. She graduated with her high school diploma and has her CNA Certificate.

Within the same year of me leaving my mother's care and entering foster care, my younger sister, the sixth born, began to suffer from mental health issues. I am not sure what the circumstances of her reentry were but she reentered foster care and my mother's rights were terminated. She emancipated at the age of eighteen, now lives with my mother and continues to struggle with severe mental health issues.

Last, but not least, my two younger brothers, the seventh and eighth born, reentered foster care a total of four times before their cases were closed. When under my mother's care, neither brother spent much time living with my mother because her mental illness greatly affected her ability to parent. My brothers often relied on connections through former foster homes, mentors and friends. When asked why they never reentered foster care, they similarly replied that everyone else left my mother and they felt a sense of loyalty not to do the same. My mother did and does love us, her children, she just was just trying to do the best she can with what she knows. The seventh born moved upstate during his junior year, graduated from high school and is now pursuing a career as a youth pastor while working full time. The eighth born is extremely smart, but struggles to apply himself. Still, he is working on his high school diploma and lives with my mother.

I can view the multiple reunifications as proof that my parents wanted to be a part of my life. As you have read my re-entries into foster care are also proof that they didn't know how to keep me safe, and care for my siblings and me effectively. Entering foster care is a traumatic experience for

all parties involved. My father felt invaded, he was raised in a family where what happens in the home stays in the home and you just don't talk about your problems. My mother felt re-victimized, haunted by her own experience in foster care as a child. Her own struggles with abandonment, broken family ties and abuse, along with a lack of addiction and mental health services, lead to my multiple reentries into care.

For many years my mother struggled to get and stay clean for my siblings and I. Her battle with mental illness, her inability to financially support eight kids, along with her dependence on an abusive man, made it practically impossible. My life had become a vicious cycle. My mother would leave my father; all of us kids would enter foster care. My mother would get clean, but the foster care system would demand more stability from her. My father had the ability to provide stability, so my mother would go back to my father as she felt it was her only choice. Our siblings would be reunified. At home, she was exposed daily to drugs, would relapse, domestic violence and neglect ensues, and our kids enter foster care again. Mother gets clean for her kids, does not understand why she returned to father and decides to leave. The cycle starts over. Eventually, my parents' rights were terminated when I was fifteen years old.

By the time my mother had finally figured out how she could maintain a house, her sobriety and work on her mental illness so that her children were returned, the damage was done. I didn't know my mother; I didn't know my siblings and we all had very different childhood experiences that no one told us would affect reunification. I was no longer the kid that just wanted to be with her mom and dad I was a budding teenager suffering with depression, angry that the world had drug me through the mud and unprepared to process all of this with parents and siblings who were struggling with their own issues. After my last reunification my mother continued therapy and every now and again she would ask that my siblings and I join her in a family session. These were not helpful. Instead I would have liked to have intensive one on one and family therapy with a therapist that specializes in the effects of long term foster care, PTSD, sibling rivalry and complicated family dynamics.

I imagine that mandatory individual and family counseling before and during reunification, along with financial assistance, would have played a huge role in a successful reunification. Such therapy combined with the substance abuse treatment she received would have helped my mother to identify childhood traumas that affected her parenting and lead to her need to numb herself with harmful substances in the first place. I also imagine, had my mother received preventative and ongoing services from professionals who understood mental illness and saw her as a victim and not a drug addict, maybe we would have never needed to spend so much of our childhood in foster care.

Although I am honored to be here speaking to all of you today, I imagine — had my mom received the services she needed during that critical time when she volunteered to get clean when I was three — I would not be standing here today. I would have not have aged-out of congregate care, and I would not still be hoping to one day find my forever family.

Support prevention services such as intensive counseling and financial assistance that help kids stay with their families. Support these same services after reunification so all parties can talk open and honestly about their fears, hopes and expectations to help families stick together, and to understand the damage time away from each other can have on their relationships. Support kinship placements at all times because sometimes parents will fail to reach the bar, but their kids should not be forced to find a new family when extended family members are available.

Today I work at an amazing group home. However, I recognize as hard as they try, group homes will never be able to give youth all the things that a loving family can. Not at graduation, not during your first pregnancy and definitely not at your 30th birthday. Group homes are temporary. Families should be forever.

Thank you,
Rosalina Burton