

STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON FINANCE  
UNITED STATES SENATE

NOVEMBER 15, 2001

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is Joan Eschenbach Ohl. It is an honor to appear before you this morning as President Bush's nominee for Commissioner, Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). I am also very pleased to be given the opportunity to work with Secretary Tommy Thompson who has been a recognized national leader in both welfare reform and social services for children and families and with Assistant Secretary Wade Horn who served as Commissioner in the administration of President George Herbert Walker Bush.

Over a 33-year career, I have focused extensively on improving the lives of children and youth – be it their health, their education or human services needs. If confirmed, I will bring to this position a broad range of experiences that I believe have prepared me for this important position. I have experience in both the public and private sectors and have demonstrated strength in management, program development, program implementation, fiscal management and budget development. One of the hallmarks of my career has been establishing effective organizational structures, programs and services. I am a very strong community-based person in that I believe the solutions to the needs of children and families are at the community level and not in State and Federal capitals. Through government partnerships - at Federal, State and local levels – we must ensure that the infrastructure and accountability system is in place for the delivery of quality health and human services.

From 1997 until early 2001, I served as Cabinet Secretary of the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR). When Governor Underwood appointed me to this position, he charged me with making DHHR modern, professional and accountable. DHHR was drowning in red ink, understaffed and had disallowances in most Federal program areas. In my four-year tenure, I worked with Governor Underwood and the Legislature to strengthen the Department by extensive focus on employees, their training, access to technology, compensation and work environments. Because of insisting on strong fiscal management, the Bureau of Medical Services – Medicaid ran in the black for fiscal years 1999, 2000 and 2001 for the first time since 1978. All past disallowances and penalties (some were from the late 80s) were paid off or settled. When I left West Virginia State government earlier this year, virtually all of the programs eligible for enhanced funding or high performance bonus funding were receiving that funding. This included adoption incentive funds, TANF high performance bonuses for job retention and success in the workforce, and enhanced funding from USDA for food stamp payment accuracy. And it is important to note that West Virginia's food stamp program gets benefits to 93% of all eligibles – the highest percentage rate of any State in the country. In the foster care program under title IV-E of the Social Security Act, we went from disallowances with the case error rate in excess of 30%, to a year 2000 audit where 80 cases were reviewed and 79 were without error and one had a judicial determination error.

I oversaw the completion and implementation of two technology systems including the West Virginia Statewide Adoption and Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) and the child support information system "OSCAR". West Virginia is one of 22 States that currently has a fully operational SACWIS system and has submitted all of its adoption and foster care reports without error or penalty. Its child support system was the sixth in the country to receive certification.

I also worked in order to vacate two Federal court orders under which the Department was operating - one in child support enforcement and another regarding the office of health facilities licensure and certification. Substantial progress was made on two long-standing mental health court orders. I sought to see that the substance of all of these court orders were met and therefore could be vacated.

During my four years at DHHR, we achieved a 40% increase in finalized adoptions as part of the “Every Child Deserves a Family” program and last year, West Virginia received an award for the most diligent use of the Adoption Resource Network – an internet-based program.

We also worked with the Governor and the Legislature to greatly expand the continuum of community-based family support and family preservation services. In 1997, there were almost 500 West Virginia children in out-of-state placements. As a part of the “Bringing Our Children Home” program we reduced the number of children in out-of-state placements by 50% and used the funds that had been paid to out-of-state placements to increase West Virginia’s infrastructure for community-based, children’s residential, behavioral health and MR/DD services. We sought and received additional funding for early intervention programs because we knew we must intervene early on with children and families in their communities and in their homes.

Finally, let me touch on child care as it is an integral component to the success of welfare reform. In West Virginia many families had found it very difficult to access subsidized child care. Thus we established programs of enhanced funding in areas where we wanted to see quality improvements in the child care program. We paid more per day per child in any center or program which was nationally accredited or served children and families in non-traditional hours; and we paid more per day per child for programs that served infants and toddlers and completed a 40 hour training program.

In 1997, I met then Governor Thompson when he came to West Virginia to meet with business groups regarding welfare reform. During his visit he gave me one bit of advice which I took to heart, he said to be sure to invest in child care. And we did. We utilized the Child Care Development Block Grant, and made TANF transfers, and did TANF direct payments for child care and in 1999 and 2000 West Virginia was recognized by HHS as having the highest percentage of utilization of subsidized child care of any State in the country. West Virginia provides child care subsidies to 25% of those eligible as compared to 12% nationally and has done it with no waiting list.

I decided in this brief presentation to focus on my last four years as West Virginia Secretary of Health and Human Resources because it best exemplifies the skills and abilities I would bring to the position of Commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families. I will continue to work to assure that the various levels of Federal, State and local government work together to ensure that a strong community-based infrastructure delivery system is established, maintained and accountable for its outcome. We must continue to focus on prevention and early intervention programs and services. And I will look forward to being an active participant in the Child and Family Service Reviews.

In Head Start, we need to assure the comprehensive nature of the Head Start program with special emphasis given to ensure that children receive the EPSDT screen and all subsequent follow up services both for their physical and behavioral health needs. There needs to be special attention given to literacy programs that ensure children are prepared and ready to enter kindergarten. We will work to coordinate with the Department of Education on a number of other early childhood programs. Under enrollment issues exist in some parts of this country and I will work with regional offices and grantees to address this issue, especially in outreach to special populations.

One area I want to give special attention to are the needs of our nation's youth. Since 1996 we have focused extensively on the needs of young children through efforts such as adoption, Head Start and child care. Some of the initial welfare reform research is showing that the needs of young children are being met, but the group which is experiencing problems are those youth entering their teenage years. We cannot neglect the needs of these youth. We need to focus on positive youth development programs. We are all well aware of the high rates of teenage drug and alcohol use, on school failure, violence, pregnancy and most tragically suicide. If confirmed, I will work extensively with Assistant Secretary Horn on a special initiative within ACF and look at ways to effectively link youth programs across all Federal agencies.

I will work closely with Secretary Thompson's Rural Initiative. Being from a rural State, I am well aware of many of the barriers which must be overcome for effective program and service delivery. I will work on initiatives which help to strengthen programs and services for rural children and families, as well as strengthen rural communities.

The goal of ACF and ACYF is to improve the well being of children and to strengthen families. I hope that through my comments today, as well as the other materials I have submitted to your Committee, that I have shown my deep commitment to these goals. Mr. Chairman, if I am confirmed, I pledge to work on a bipartisan basis with you, the members of this Committee and the Congress to insure that ACYF reaches these goals.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.