

Opening Statement of Maria Cancian

Nominee to be the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Senate Committee on Finance

June 25, 2014

Chairman Wyden, Ranking Member Hatch, and members of the committee: Thank you for inviting me here today. I am honored to have been nominated, by President Obama, to serve as the Assistant Secretary of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and to have the opportunity to appear before you.

My grandparents came to the United States searching for religious freedom and the opportunity for a better life. My parents worked hard, and taught my brother and me that the relative security we enjoyed brought responsibilities, not only to our family, but to the broader community. They encouraged me to take interest in social issues and this encouragement informed my decision to apply my skills as an economist to address social policy. With their words and example, they also provided me with the foundation to take risks and go beyond narrow academic pursuits. In my professional life that has meant working beyond campus boundaries in collaboration with colleagues in local, state and federal agencies to help design, implement and evaluate public policies and programs serving families. In my personal life, my family has tried to live our values. As a foster family, we have shared our home and expanded our family in ways that have transformed our understanding of our community.

I cannot imagine a greater responsibility or opportunity to serve than I would have were I confirmed as Assistant Secretary for Children and Families. Our future depends on the wellbeing and future productivity of our children, and parents today face many demands as they raise the next generation of Americans. Few families have a parent who stays at home full time; instead, parents typically must balance their responsibilities as parents and workers. And, most American children will spend some portion of their life living apart from at least one of their parents—typically because their parents divorce or may never have married. The challenges of parenting are that much greater without the emotional and financial support of a stable marriage.

Many of the programs within ACF support parents' best efforts to provide for their children financially as well as emotionally. Childcare and early education programs help keep children safe while their parents work; they also provide a strong foundation for future learning. The child support system encourages nonresident parents to support their children financially even when they do not live together. Teen pregnancy prevention and responsible parenting programs aim to encourage young people to avoid becoming parents while they are themselves still children, and help new parents recognize and meet their responsibilities. When parents do not have the resources to provide for their children, TANF may provide time-limited income support and services to become self-sufficient. And when parents cannot provide a safe environment for their children, the child welfare system is a safety net of last resort.

The position of Assistant Secretary for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) requires both knowledge of the programs for which ACF is responsible and an ability to effectively manage a large organization. Twenty years' engagement with research, outreach and technical assistance has provided me with knowledge of many ACF programs. I have formed an appreciation of the challenges faced by policymakers, managers, and front-line staff in their efforts to implement these programs through my many collaborations with them at the Federal, State and local levels. This appreciation and understanding was further developed when I served as a full time fellow assigned to work on child welfare issues at the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families in 2010. Over the years, I have learned a great deal from working closely with policymakers and scholars from both political parties and across multiple administrations, finding common ground in a shared effort to do our best to strengthen American families.

I also have significant organizational management experience, largely developed through my experience as an academic administrator. As the Associate Dean for Fiscal Initiatives in the College of Letters & Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I have been involved in University wide efforts to reshape our budget and administration, and have had primary responsibility for fiscal policy development and planning for a college with over 2000 faculty and staff and 22,000 students. During a period of increasing enrollments and stable or declining state financial support, I have taken the lead in developing a new budget model to increase transparency and reallocate funding and staff resources to better meet strategic priorities.

I believe my research, policy and administrative experience have prepared me to contribute to the important work of ACF. If I am confirmed, I look forward to the opportunity to work with Congress, the dedicated professionals within ACF, partners in other federal agencies, in state and local government, and the private and nonprofit sectors, to assure that we are wise stewards of public resources, and do everything we are able to support America's children and families.