

**House Committee on Oversight and Reform hearing on *The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights*, Thursday
February 27th, 2020.**

**Testimonies to enter into the record by LGBTQ children and parents who have been
discriminated against in foster care and adoption.**

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Christopher Harris

Los Angeles, CA

How Discrimination Almost Kept a Celebrated Doctor from Adopting his Daughter

The process of adoption brought Christopher Harris through three different agencies, having faced discrimination at the first two. Although he superseded all requirements — having five recommendation letters and taking additional parenting courses on top of extensive paperwork — Harris often found himself waiting for months to years with no word from the agencies where he had placed all his resources.



February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony to the Committee for the hearing on *The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights*. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, and to share why Congress must act to end discrimination in foster care and adoption, by passing Congressman John Lewis' bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114. I am submitting my testimony via Family Equality, an organization representing LGBTQ families and LGBTQ people wishing to form families.

Chris Harris' Story:

Christopher Harris, M.D., is a pediatric pulmonologist and currently works at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, directing the Division of Pediatric Pulmonary Medicine. He is also Professor of Pediatrics at the University of California-Los Angeles. With an extensive medical career spanning decades, Harris is remarkably accomplished. A faculty member at some of the country's most prestigious medical universities and board certified twice, he still finds time to serve in many civic organizations — most recently as the President of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association Board.

Despite his extensive work history and training, there is one experience Harris cites as the culmination of his training: “The saying goes, you don’t complete your pediatric training until you have your own kids.” Harris’ training was completed in 2002, when he adopted his daughter Maria. In the 15 years that have followed, Harris cites fatherhood as both his most significant accomplishment and his greatest joy.

But getting there wasn’t easy. The process of adoption brought Harris through three different agencies, having faced discrimination at the first two. Although he superseded all requirements — having five recommendation letters and taking additional parenting courses on top of extensive paperwork — Harris often found himself waiting for months to years with no word from the agencies where he had placed all his resources.

“I would be out and about and see people I was in parenting classes with. While I was still waiting, they would say ‘Oh yeah, we were placed with a child months ago.’”



In recounting his story, Harris distinctly remembers another gay man who was in his parenting class facing the same situation. One day, he followed up with an adoption agency after not hearing back for months, and an employee made their discriminatory practices crystal clear. “Oh gee Dr. Harris,” he recounted, “we work with single women, but not single men.”

In his journey to adoption, Harris had attempted to work with several religiously affiliated agencies who received government funds and yet, would fully limit the selection of potential parents, based on personal beliefs. After the final blow, Harris was determined to work with an agency that had the best interest of the child at the center of their practice. Fortunately for Chris, he found an agency where he was able to adopt his daughter, Maria.

Harris describes fatherhood as the highlight of his life. He is a loving father who wholeheartedly gives his love, attention, and resources to support his daughter. Yet, it’s important to remember that, due to discrimination, his

adoption almost didn’t happen. Across the country LGBTQ people are [seven times more likely to foster, and seven times more likely to adopt](#). Many more children could be finding loving homes through adoption, as long as the pathway to supportive families is not blocked by bigotry.

“How people approve or disapprove of potential parents should have nothing to do with sexual orientation or gender identity. But it has everything to do with whether or not a person has the capabilities, heart and love to be a parent,” Harris advised.

Better take the doctor’s advice.

Joe Sabella-Heinemann

Oakland, CA

February 27, 2020

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When we were adopting our first child, in 2006, we were so excited to finally consummate the adoption of our son. He had just made 9 when we were picked to be his forever family. We lived in Dallas and visited him every week in Lubbock, a 6-hour drive, until January. He was living in the Children's Home of Lubbock. He had been a ward of the state for many years. The Director of the Children's Home at the time, Vicky, was especially difficult for us. She was obstructive. When it was coming time for him to be placed with us, she decided that our son needed to attend a group of classes. It was one thing and then another. We finally confronted her saying that we were aware of the prejudice and it needed to stop. She acted like she had no idea of what we were talking about.

In addition, one of the group home caretakers decided to say that they wanted to adopt him. This couple had done nothing to indicate their interest in the several years he had lived in this center. They were not even at a starting point to be ready to adopt a child. In addition, they were expecting their first child, so they were in no position to bring another child into their family. We finally reported this behavior to the supervisor at Child Protective Services, who was a managing conservator, not the Children's Home. We told her what was going on and that they wanted to continue our visits infinitely. Her response was that we had done the required amount of transitional visits and if they had education they wanted to do with him, they needed to double-up on it. He was ready for placement. We did remind Miss Vicky that they received state dollars and that if they discriminated, they risked losing the federal funding. He finally transitioned to our home in Dallas. The family who in passing said they wanted to adopt him came for a visit once while visiting Dallas. They were so happy to see him doing so well and told us what a great home we had provided him.

When consummation day came, we had one more expression of hate. The judge hearing the adoption case said that he would not hyphenate our son's name. He also said, on the bench, that if it was up to him, we would not be adopting a child. That judge lost his next bid for re-election. Today our son is 22, living on his own, and doing well. He overcame so much.

In 2011 and 2012, we adopted three more children from the foster system using the same biological family. This time our case was heard in Fort Worth, rather than Dallas. There the judge was so excited to see the children with their forever family. The same judge had removed them from a horrible life-condition. During the adoption, the judge brought the entire family onto the bench with him and let the children use his gavel when it was time to finally consummate. Afterwards, the judge posed with our family for photos. It was such a different experience than we had in Dallas with a bigoted, homophobic judge. This judge was happy that the children had a loving family.

I oppose discrimination in foster care and adoption based on religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity because:

It is not in the child's best interest. Religious bigotry is hate, not religion

David Dickson
Rancho Santa Margarita, CA



February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

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When me and my husband were foster parents back in Georgia we were told on several occasions that we were not receiving calls for placement because we were a "nontraditional family". We had three empty bedrooms to accept kids in need but we continuously were overlooked. We fought like

hell to get a placement and thank GOD we did because we now have four amazing kids. The road was long and painful, but we have a family to call our own now.

After fostering our four kids which came with several highs and lows, we were finally able to adopt our kids. I guess I should say my husband was able to adopt them through the foster care system. At the time the foster care system dropped me and my name from all paperwork once it moved from fostering to adoption. I was no longer recognized, and we had to find an attorney and judge that would allow me to do a second parent adoption in Georgia. At a time that should be a moment of celebration, we were forced emotionally and financially to make alternative plans to form our family. It was not even guaranteed but thankfully we found an attorney and judge willing to help us. It was a very humiliating and frightening experience.

I oppose discrimination in foster care and adoption based on religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity because:

Seeing our four kids now growing into such loving and caring people reminds me that every child in the foster care system deserves a chance, a home, and to be loved unconditionally. After eight years I still think about what all our kids went through at such a young age and it breaks my heart. I have seen and heard so many tragic stories during our time in the foster care system and to think that there are some that want to deny loving people from helping these kids in need is a tragedy in itself.

Morgan Hayes
Johns Creek, GA



February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

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There is really only one agency in Georgia we could adopt from. The other either outwardly ban gay couples, or just subtly don't help them. Our agency contracted out our home study to a woman that was only accepting of a traditional Christian household. It made for a difficult home study that I needed to have edited for accuracy for the state to finally approve.

My adopted daughter already had a failed adoptive placement. They decided she needed a home without males, which made her really hard to place. They were wary of an only mom household because of her trauma behaviors. Her caseworker was so thrilled when a same sex couple was matched with my daughter. Through therapeutic parenting and a lot of trial and error our daughter now has strong healthy relationships with multiple safe males.

I oppose discrimination in foster care and adoption based on religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity because:

Children like my daughter need homes. They need a chance. Same sex couples offer as much love and safety as a heterosexual couple. We have strength, and love and conviction and these children need us. There are so many children in care, we shouldn't be turning away any homes.

Ryan Murphy

Peoria, IL



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Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

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Back in 2009 we started the process to foster and adopt through a local organization. This was prior to Illinois passing Civil Unions and Same Sex Marriage. You could tell the caseworker was a bit uncomfortable being in the home of a same sex couple. When we were about to go on the active list, he told us that any potential children could only be listed as a foster child or adopted by one and not both of us. This was heartbreaking to us, and we decided to not pursue it any further.

5 years later after having a Civil Union and then a Marriage License, we started the process all over with a new agency. We were welcomed with open arms. New forms were printed with 'parent A and parent B' rather than 'mother and father'. We now have 3 beautiful adopted children. There is no reason why children cannot be adopted and fostered by same sex couples. There are so many children out there that need loving families to raise and care for them. There are WAY more straight people out there that should not be having children. Thankfully there are those of us that can take these children when they aren't able to care for them.

I oppose discrimination in foster care and adoption based on religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity because:

Children need loving, nurturing homes. There aren't enough foster homes already and eliminating a child's ability to find a loving safe space by preventing qualified and loving people from giving them that based on religion, sexual orientation or gender identity is just wrong. It hurts children in the long run and would leave them in the system unnecessarily.

Ryan LaLonde

Vernon Hills, IL

February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

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My now husband and I adopted our son in Maryland in 2008. Starting in 2006 we began the process and signed on with the agency, Adoptions Together, in Silver Spring, Maryland. It has a positive reputation in the community. As an interracial same sex couple, we hoped for an organization that catered to gay couples. We did a panel for them on being gay parents and felt this was a good match. After paying \$5000 dollars and going through all the paperwork, trainings, background checks, and inspections we finally qualified in 2007. Our caseworker was the niece of the owner of the agency. She made very racist and anti-gay statements in our interactions, but we were afraid to complain. After 6 months we were finally ready to be matched with a birth family and we did a check in to see how our book viewing was going with prospective families. They stated that our book was never shown because families were requesting Christian families. Even though we were active members of a local Christian church the agency chose not to include our family because being a same-sex family meant we were inherently not Christian.

We left the agency.

Then after working with another agency. We ran into a problem with the adoption agency in Montgomery County. Instead our lawyer stated that we should move the process to Baltimore county. One of the family court judges in Montgomery County was very anti-gay and wouldn't do the adoption because of his Christian faith and his interpretation of gray areas in the adoption laws.

I oppose discrimination in foster care and adoption based on religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity because:

As a person who works with children in foster care in Lake County, Illinois I know the importance of loving homes in a child's foster care journey and they should not be shortchanged because of bias in any regard.

Ellen and Missy Cummings

Worcester, MA

Home for the Holidays: Ellen & Missy's Adoption Story

“I would just say for any parents looking to adopt, the process at times can seem extremely tedious and it could be hard — the waiting and the process they put you through. But if you want it in your heart it would be beyond anything you can imagine.”



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Here is my family's story:

Ellen and Missy's life together begins with a chance meeting at a bookstore, Borders, to be specific. Missy lived in Worcester and Ellen lived in Boston. Although the two lived over an hour apart, their relationship steadily advanced as they would visit each other back and forth. Eventually, Missy moved in and they ended up living in Franklin, before settling in Worcester to be near family.

With a new house and a great location, the couple quickly started talking about building their own family. At first, they had different ideas on how to do that. Ellen wanted to adopt and Missy wanted to get pregnant. When Missy's route didn't work out, the couple decided to change directions and start the adoption process.

“Thank goodness it didn't work out.” Missy says.

In 2009, they began the process: mountains of paperwork, multiple interviews, and a few uncanny setbacks, like a lost set of fingerprints. Despite the challenges, the couple describes all of that just as a part of the process of things falling into place.

“You have to believe in the process. Believe that everything is working out the way it should,” Ellen says, reflecting on that time. “My son wasn't ready for us.”

During the holdup of Missy’s missing fingerprints, the couple decided to go ahead and continue with the home-study as the year wound to an end. But they started to worry as time inched towards December – they had been warned that children were typically not placed during the holidays.

And then one Monday in December, they got the call about a little boy – but they’d have to meet with the adoption agency that very afternoon.

“That was a Monday, and by Tuesday afternoon he was with us. We had to rally and get the room set, there wasn’t a lot of information, but they told us we needed to take him immediately because he was pulled from his foster home,” Ellen shared.

Their son, Raeden, was four. He came home right in time for the Christmas season.



When he arrived, the Christmas tree was all set up and lit, with a toy train he was thrilled about. The following day was a snow day, which provided the perfect opportunity for the new family to get to know each other better, playing together in the snow. As they were in the backyard sledding, he looked up at Missy and asked, “Can I call you mom?” and then she started to cry.

Then Raeden looked up at the house and pointed at Ellen’s office and asked a similar question:

“Can I call her mom?”

Since then, he’s called the pair Mommy Ellen and Mommy Missy.

Raeden, now 13, is in 8th grade, and will be going to high school next year.

For any parents looking to adopt, the couple advises to trust the process.

“I would just say for any parents looking to adopt, the process at times can seem extremely tedious and it could be hard – the waiting and the process they put you through. But if you want it in your heart, it would be beyond anything you can imagine,” Ellen said.

Missy agrees, “You can get ready really quick when it’s your time. He’s been the love of our life and the joy we have with him everyday is wonderful.”

Karamo Brown

Texas



Testimony of Karamo Brown

Submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Government Reform for the Hearing on The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights

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Imagine someone on the street who is starving... imagine saying to them that there is healthy food available for them that will meet their needs but unfortunately they will have to starve because you don't like the person who is serving the food.

Sounds ridiculous, inhumane.

Now, I want you to imagine a young person, starving for support, love, a home and a family to call their own... Imagine saying to them we have a family for you but because I don't like the person who wants to be your family, you will not have a family.

It's equally ridiculous and it is negligent!

As a former social worker who worked with kids in the foster care system, my job was to protect children and to ensure that they weren't being neglected. To ensure that they were safe; bluntly to ensure they were not being abused by the adults around them.

To deny a child a safe environment and a loving family for non merit related reason alarms me as a social worker.

I also provide this testimony as a single gay man who understands the difficult process of adopting a child in a state that allows children to be deprived of a loving and safe home because of discrimination.

There I was qualified, educated, no criminal background, high income, and wanting to give my now adopted son a loving home. But in the state of Texas I was constantly discriminated against because I was gay and because I was single. Now, I had the means and the knowledge to not be discouraged by a system that believed the love and home I was going to provide my son with wasn't equal to the love of a straight married couple. So I fought and my son entered my home and has recently graduated from high school, happy and healthy.

But I think about those families or individuals who get overwhelmed by the discrimination and become discouraged. Then I think about the child who has now lost a loving family to take them in, and what that means for their future.

When you're looking at a child who just wants love and support it's simple to understand why discrimination has no place in the foster care and adoption systems.

Again, as a former social worker I believe that children should be protected from negligent behavior; but as a father I believe that our children need to be protected from the negligent politics of adults by all cost. Our goal should always be to ensure that every child has the tools, the support and the love they need to succeed in this world. But when we discriminate against both LGBTQ youth and parents, as well as religious minorities and single men who want to foster or adopt, we do the exact opposite; we endanger our children and our country's future.

Thank you.

Karamo Brown

Stacy Freeman

Frederick, MD

February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

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We received notification that our four great-nieces were in foster care in Alabama. The two oldest girls were placed in a Baptist Group home and the younger two were placed in a foster home. They were not allowed to remain together, which frightened them more than they already were due to the drug and criminal behaviors of their mom (our niece). They were placed in foster care in January because they were living in a motel with no food (they had milk, a can of vegetables, and a can or so of soup), no transportation, and their mom was in jail on an open warrant. We found out in March, via social media, they were in care and immediately took the necessary steps to get them out of foster care and with us in Maryland. We hired a great lawyer, completed the paperwork for kinship care, and changed our entire lives to ensure the children would not remain in foster care. Our niece did not work towards our family plan; she failed a drug test, did not secure a stable living arrangement for the children, did not complete parenting classes, and did not secure transportation. The father of the three younger girls refused to do anything and the father of the oldest lived out of state and was on parole for manslaughter.

My wife and I (same-sex lesbian married couple) appeared in court in Alabama in September for a permanency hearing because our niece was not compliant with the recommendations from social services. The CASA worker's report specifically recommended the children be placed with us to provide a stable environment until their mother could get the help she needed. The court hearing began with me (masculine appearing) being asked to leave the courtroom. I was not considered "family" even though we are legally married. We are both Army veterans, employed full-time with the federal government, have reliable transportation, and own our home. We have never been involved with the criminal justice system nor did we want to adopt the children; we simply did not want them to remain with foster parents until our niece could work things out in her life.

The court hearing concluded with me sitting outside for five hours and my wife dealing with the entire case emotionally by herself. CASA, the foster parent, our lawyer, and the court-appointed lawyer for our niece were all supportive of fostering until things were worked out. However, the judge (Brent Craig) dismissed the entire case and returned the children to our niece. The judge had two options to choose from because of the length the children were in foster care at that point. He had to either allow the children to be placed with us as a "viable" option or completely dismiss the case. Since our niece was not making the necessary changes in her life, everyone assumed the kids would either remain in foster care or be sent to live with us. The court appointed attorney for our

niece, the foster mother, and the CASA worker were completely shocked. The best interests of the children were thrown out the window for the sake of bigotry.

Since we live in Maryland, we chose to continue the process of becoming certified foster parents because the chance of the children returning to foster care is extremely high due to our niece's criminal activity and addiction. Frederick County Maryland was highly supportive of us and needed a placement for two girls who really needed a home without men. Frederick County Social Services has gone as far as having me train other foster parents in the LGBTQ community and has even set up a booth at the local Pride festival to attract other foster parents. Many of their forms have been changed to reflect applicant instead of husband/wife.

I oppose discrimination in foster care and adoption based on religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity because:

1. The safety of the children is paramount.
2. Splitting up children into various placements only hurts the children especially when there is a viable home option with family.
3. CASA and social services should have a larger say in the care of the children as opposed to a judge.
4. Forms should be changed to reflect "Applicant" and remove sexual orientation and gender.
5. Train DSS and courts on the LGBTQ community.

Corina Dulecki
Grand Rapids, MI



February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

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I oppose discrimination in foster care and adoption based on religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity because 1) it is morally reprehensible and 2) it affects my family because my daughter is a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

People say when you know better, you do better and that is why I am telling you my story. I worked for a Christian adoption/foster care agency in the past. I very much regret this due to their discriminatory practices toward LGBTQ+ folks and those that do not identify as Christian.

I have been a social worker in the state of Michigan since the early '90's. My first job in Wayne County was working for a private agency as a foster care case manager. I did this for a couple of years and then my husband took a job in Kent County so a move across the state was necessary (this was around 1994). I started looking for jobs and found an ad for the same job at a private agency called Bethany Christian Services. I got an interview and then a job offer quickly. I jumped at the offer because I felt comfortable doing this work. I first started to notice a difference with this agency when I was filling out the necessary paperwork. I had to sign an affirmation of faith which was similar to the Apostle's creed. I did believe the things that it said (because I am a practicing Christian) but I didn't like the idea that I had to sign this to work there. As a relatively new social worker at that time, I didn't know how easy it would be for me to find a job so I didn't want to "rock the boat" and I signed it. I began my work and began learning more about the agency as well as the culture of West Michigan. I came to understand that Bethany was affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church and this belief system was well entrenched within the agency. I learned pretty early on that to be an adoptive parent you had to belong to a Christian church. As a matter of fact, it had to be the correct

kind of church. I learned that a local church in Grand Rapids (Fountain Street) did not count as it was not “really” Christian. This really bothered me, but I continued to work there and I didn’t say anything about their policies to people in power. I worked at Bethany for a couple of years until I quit so I could go to graduate school for a masters in social work.

I finished grad school, worked at a different job for a short while and then ended up leaving the social work field for ten years to raise my children. That was much longer then I had initially intended to be away from social work. Around 2005 I went back to work once again in the area of child welfare. I took a position in an agency where I did in home therapy with families that had been involved with Child Protective Services. I did this work for a year when the agency lost the state contract for the program and Bethany Christian Services got the contract. Bethany was very considerate to interview everyone who wanted to continue in the program and work for them. Once again, I found myself in a very similar situation. I had been out of the field for a decade and did not know how easy it would be to find another job and I liked the work I was doing. So, when Bethany offered me the position so I could keep doing what I had been doing, I accepted. Once again, I had to sign a profession of faith and I realized that Bethany had not changed in the decade since I last worked there.

I worked for Bethany for about four years until I transitioned out of child welfare work into medical social work. Over the years as I matured as a person and as a social worker, I thought more and more about Bethany’s adoption policy (that a person had to be a Christian to adopt through them). This went against my values as a social worker as well as my Christian beliefs. I did not understand how Bethany’s board of directors could view Christian principals so differently than me. There were so many children in the foster care system waiting for homes.

Bethany’s discriminatory practices really became personal for me a few years ago. My oldest child let my husband and I know that she is gay. This was not difficult for me to hear but it made me wonder what the future would look like for her. Of course, the idea of children and child birth was one thing that I thought about. At the time when my daughter told me about her sexual orientation, she was only a sophomore in college so having children was not really in the forefront of her mind, nor is it now as a recent college grad. It is however still on my mind. I fully and whole heartedly support whatever she would like to do with her future: have children or not have children, birth a child, or adopt a child. It pains me greatly to have worked for an agency that would discriminate against my daughter and others just because of the person that they love. I am frustrated with myself that I worked for an agency that discriminates against people because of their religion or sexual orientation.

I can’t change the fact that I did not speak out about these practices in the past, but I have vowed to do better. As a social worker, I believe that everyone deserves nondiscrimination protections and the same taxpayer-funded benefits and services. As a mother I want to do anything in my power to fight for the rights of my child and any person who identifies as LGBTQ+ so if they want to adopt a child, they will not be discriminated against. As a Christian, I want to do what I can to support any person regardless of their religious beliefs if they want to foster or adopt a child. For those reasons, I write this and for these reasons I vote.

Weston Charles-Gallo

Liberty, Missouri



Testimony of Weston Charles-Gallo

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February 27, 2020

Dear Chairwoman Maloney, Chairman Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony to the Committee for the hearing on *The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights*. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, and to share why Congress must act to end discrimination in foster care and adoption, by passing Congressman John Lewis' bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114. I am submitting my testimony via Family Equality, an organization representing LGBTQ families and LGBTQ people wishing to form families, and FosterClub, the national network for youth in foster care.

While I was in foster care I experienced discrimination from foster care placements because of my sexual orientation and race (biracial). I was in an emergency shelter in a very rural community because not many placements were open to the idea of having a gay black foster child. They already had racial bias but when it came to my sexual orientation, they feared that I turn the other kids in the gay or have predatory behavior.

Often the world we live in is something that no one would expect for it to be. When we are born we do not get a choice as to who are parents are or the class we're born into. While some explain family to be happy, cheerful and constantly giving reassurance, I didn't know what that was like. Many people don't understand the amount of courage it takes to stand up for what you believe in, even when the only people you know and love turn away. I came from a family that was broken from the

start. My father was an alcoholic and drug addict and when he was home most of the time he was abusive. On the other hand, my mother was a victim of domestic violence and was scared to ever speak her mind. With the ongoing voices in my head telling me what I should do, I do what I know I should not, constructing fear and loneliness to follow me in every direction, burying my emotions deep where they may never be found again.

From a young age, I knew that I didn't have the classic characteristics of a boy. I didn't like to play catch outside with a football and I absolutely didn't appreciate being dirty; instead I played with my sister's Barbies, trying on my mom heels when she was at work and loved watching America's Next Top Model, where I learned that you must work it from H to T.

From right there, I knew that I was different. I always found myself internally complementing boys my age and not ever knowing why. For myself, I knew that I was gay at a really young age but because my family deemed it an abomination, I didn't feel that I could live my authentic self. One phrase that I will never be able to forget are the words loudly spoken, "If my son turns out to be gay, I will not only beat the gay out of him but throw him out of my house." At age eight, my father very well may have haunted me for a lifetime. Often times after that, I found myself only doing things to please the ones I thought meant the most.

In the summer of 2013, I told the biggest secret that might have changed my life forever. As the words, "I think I am gay", came out of my mouth, I remember my mother's reaction, yelling, "no you are not." My mother never told my father that I was gay, because she knew what would happen. So instead my mom blackmailed me, holding it against me any way possible. One day my parents got into an argument where my mom stated that he was an awful father because his son turned out gay, My dad asked if this was true and I hesitated and he knew that it was true, unfortunately that hesitation was all he needed. He started yelling, throwing things and was punching and slamming doors.

If being rejected at home wasn't enough the amount of hurtful comments made at school made me feel like I was an outsider. The bullying never stopped. The number of death threats on Facebook that I received almost every day tore me down, my self-esteem began to crash and the feelings of hopelessness became clear.

My family was very religious; my father was the deacon of the church and my mom was a member of the choir. As many know, being gay doesn't fit in the category of someone who worships God. My parents thought that it would be a good idea to make me talk to our pastor about my sexuality and how it wasn't right. When I realized that they were trying to change who I was through conversion therapy. I refused to talk to him and that only made matters worse. This resulted in me losing touch with my faith that I still to this day, struggle with.

One night, the fights got to where they have never been before. Hurtful words were shared, hands were thrown. I ran away and later that night I saw myself getting into the back of the police car heading to a juvenile detention center to only find out that my parents no longer wanted anything to do with me. I was placed into the foster care system, just another percent to the statistic of children without parents. Being discharged to my first foster home, the amount of hopelessness began to widen and thoughts in my head and cuts on my arm began to be horrifying as I was sent to a behavior hospital where this marked my first time at ending pain altogether.

All my life I was known as the "flamboyant black kid" that had great taste in outfit choices. When I came into care I was open about my sexuality; that later became a concern in finding a placement. Living in a rural community, the level of hatred and bigotry spread like a wildfire. I was stereotyped

as the gay teen that they feared would rub off on other children. Knowing that all of this was happening it broke my heart because at that time all I wanted was a family that loved me for me.

Through many visits in hospitals again, bouncing from foster home to foster home and even living in a shelter, these horrible experiences resulted in giving up my childhood and learning how to be an adult at only the age of 14. Not knowing what direction I was heading in or what the outcome may be, all I could think of was, "I can't control what's happening but I can continue to fight." Even as I felt that nothing could go right, I received the amazing news that my impermanence in foster care was a thing in the past. I finally found a home where I can live my authentic self and began loving who I am as a person, not hiding a part of myself that society has deemed wrong.

I was placed with my two dads and 6 siblings. My dads showed me what it was like to witness a true marriage and live a normal life, expressing the meaning of what a family was about. Before I lived with them, I never pictured myself marrying someone or even having a family but they proved to me that anything is possible and without them in my life constantly supporting and encouraging me, I do not know where I would be today. It is because of them that I can be the person that I have always wanted to be.

Although not all of us share the same stories or experiences, one point I would like to make is each and every one of us wants rights and equality for all. I take pride being a part of the LGBTQ+ community where we all unite to celebrate and honor all of the efforts made to live an authentic life every day. Through being yourself, you are contributing to a movement that has given a voice to standing up for what you believe in. You embrace the person you are, no matter the hatred you might be facing. Iconic superstar Lady Gaga once said "No matter gay, straight, or bi, lesbian, transgendered life. I'm on the right track baby. I was born to survive." This strong message has proven that it does not matter how you identify you are a person and you were made beautiful and no one can take that away from you.

I never intended for my life to take the route that it did, but does anyone really? Through it all, I indeed feel gratitude that I could open my eyes and allow myself to find hope and serenity that seemed impossible, in the fact that my sexuality will and forever not be the damper in how my life will continue. I quickly began to realize that being gay does not define who I am but only builds who I'm becoming. A strong and resilient individual who will continue to fight for the lives of LGBTQ youth that need affirming placements to reach their full potential and live their authentic self unapologetically. In this generation, we are known as the ones to push through barriers being ambitious and using our voices to make change and that is exactly what I feel I was born to do. I may have lost the ones I thought would love me unconditionally but I never lost sight of who I was and the person I aspire to be.

That's why I support the bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114, which would end discrimination based on religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity in foster care. This bill, introduced by Congressman John Lewis, which has 185 cosponsors, would also provide states like Missouri with resources to provide better services for LGBTQ foster youth, so that children in care now wouldn't have to go through the same hard times I did. I urge the Committee to support passage of HR 3114, and to require the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to end discrimination in its foster care programs, and to provide affirming services to every LGBTQ child in foster care, regardless of the religion of the agency serving the child.

Daryle Conquering Bear

Denver, CO



Testimony of Daryle Conquering Bear

Submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Government Reform for the Hearing on The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights

February 27, 2020

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Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony to the Committee for the hearing on *The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights*. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, and to share why Congress must act to end discrimination in foster care and adoption, by passing Congressman John Lewis' bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114. I am submitting my testimony via Family Equality, an organization representing LGBTQ families and LGBTQ people wishing to form families, and FosterClub, the national network for youth in foster care.

My name is Daryle Conquering Bear Crow. I'm an enrolled member of the Oglala Lakota Sioux tribe located in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. I am currently living in Denver, Colorado and am a high school boys and girls coach and Youth advocate.

In May of 2019, at a Congressional Briefing regarding the Every Child Deserves a Family Act, I came out as being Two-Spirited.

I am shocked because, what foster care did, and what failed Indian Child Welfare Act did, was take away my customs, take away my childhood culture. I knew I was Two-Spirited before foster care. I did stuff with all my friends who were females, we loved the Spice Girls, we sang songs but when I went into foster care, everything was ripped away. My tribal customs, my native ceremonies, being

able to sing a Britney Spear song or Backstreet Boys song without being told that, it's not natural, it's not realistic reality. You ought to listen to Tupac . No, I didn't want to do that.

I was placed in a home where I told them that I liked boys. The next day I was removed. I wondered why. INow that I've done the research and everything, they don't want gay boys. They want an all American person who loves sports, who wanted to go to Homecoming.

So the next foster home, guess what I did? Put on that man face. I was the all American that they wanted. While I was in high school in Sterling, Colorado, prom king, had the high school girls as my prom date. Why? Why did I have to emasculate myself to be able to be free?

And then, having that emasculating mask on, it taught me a lot. I was a high school coach after I graduated high school and went on to college, I put that mask on, but I have fellow basketball student athletes who were gay, and we connected. And they're like, "Coach? How come you don't have a wife? Where's your kids?" I said, "Oh, there's not time for that." And they were very connected with me, and they did, and we had to keep our relationship on, what they call, the D L, and I said, "You know what? I have to be able to speak up for these kids, to be able to say, 'You know what? It's okay to be gay. You can play sports.'"

It wasn't until a few years ago where gay athletes were coming out, and it wasn't until a few years ago when I was in my first relationship, when I was like, okay, I can be gay, Two-Spirit, in my indigenouness culture, Two-Spirit, but then the mask came back on a year after that.

And it's groups like this organization, the FosterClub, and the National Indian Child Welfare Association, , where we band together and come together, and we fight against those oppositions for the Indian Child Welfare Acts, or the Every Child Deserves a Family Acts.

We're not just faces, we're real stories. Forty-five children in this hour will enter foster care. Some will identify as Native American, Muslim, gay, Two-Spirit, they will be discriminated because this act hasn't passed where it's not going to be passed gay. But if it is, there will be children, whether they identify as male, female, or whatever their identifier is, that's going to be able to play sports, that's going to be able to enjoy music, that's going to be able to enjoy their times being in care because we are going to have resources, we are going to have trainings, under the Every Child Deserves a Family Act, to be able to them be proud.

I wish I would have had parents that I would have been able to go talk to, so I could go to their Pride Fest and say, "Hey, my parents are gay, I'm Two-Spirited, too." It's not a reality yet but let's make it a reality.

But the environments that aren't safe. We don't have loving families that await for them, whether you are Two-Spirit or straight.

That's why I support the bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114, which would end discrimination based on religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity in foster care. This bill, introduced by Congressman John Lewis, which has 185 cosponsors, would also provide states like Colorado with resources to provide better services for LGBTQ and Two-Spirit foster youth, so that children in care now wouldn't have to go through the same hard times I did. I urge the Committee to support passage of HR 3114, and to require the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to end discrimination in its foster care programs, and to provide affirming services to every LGBTQ child in foster care, regardless of the religion of the agency serving the child.

Kritsopher Sharp

New York, NY



Testimony of Kristopher Sharp

Submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Government Reform for the Hearing on The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights

February 27, 2020

Dear Chairwoman Maloney, Chairman Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

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I am originally from Texas, and I currently live and work in New York City at an organization led by a human rights lawyer and activist Cary Kennedy, called Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights. I am writing because there's a growing crisis taking place in each and every one of our communities. I'm hoping to impress upon you and your bosses what the real world implications are, and why passage of the Every Child Deserves A Family Act will move the ball forward in a major way.

In the United States there are 442 thousand children in foster care. Over a 123 thousand of whom are waiting for adoption. At one point in my life, I was one of those children too. I was taken away from my family of origin and placed in the foster care system when I was nine years old. I went on to live in over 25 different placements throughout all corners of Texas before aging out of the system and into homelessness at age 18. I sometimes joke and tell folks that my many placement changes

will be a wonderful selling point when I run for governor of Texas, because I can legit say I've been everybody's neighbor at some point or another.

But the reality is much bleaker. Of the 25 placements I shuffled through, only three of them were actual foster families. The rest were facilities we and the child welfare space refer to as daycare settings. These facilities are staffed by rotating care givers and house anywhere from a dozen to sometimes upwards of a hundred children. I learned very early on in my foster care journey, even though I was nine at the time, that most of the case workers, counselors, and care givers I encountered received my fervent love of things like Sailor Moon, Destiny's Child, and Brittany Spears to mean that I was gay. Because most organizations offering foster care services are faith based, I was told after I was removed from my second foster family placement that unless I manned up, I'd likely never find a forever family.

People just don't want gay kids. My caseworker told me that as she was driving me to the first facility I would be placed in. My foster care journey became more and more traumatic for me as time passed. At a facility called the Nelson Center, in Denton TX, where I lived for a year and a half, I experienced things no child should ever have to endure. One evening I was taken by a care giver into a large corner room that was used to store donated clothing after I was involved in a minor incident with one of my peers down the hallway from this room. This caregiver was a tall man who often made comments about me and my feminine ways. Often calling me fudge packer, and other derogatory names in front of my peers. When he came into the room, he closed a door lined with racks of clothes behind him. And in the guise of the escalated situation, he picked me up, threw me on the ground, and began to restrain me. As I was on the ground, pinned under him, he managed to push the basketball shorts I had on down to my knees, and he molested me.

I still have scars from the carpet burns I got on my legs as I was trying to resist him. I was 13 when this happened. Even worse, because of the nature of these kinds of placements where doors are locked by powerful magnetic strips, children are typically home schooled, or they attend school on campus. Staff tells you when to eat, when to take your meds, when to go to bed. Phones are kept behind locked doors. There was no way for me to even report what was happening to me. This specific facility is now closed after a child's neck was fractured during restraint. These practices are unfortunately common occurrences in these types of facilities all over America.

I left this facility only to shuffle through a half dozen other placements before eventually aging out of a similar type of facility in Houston, Texas. Because I had no family, no community, and few connections, I was forced onto the streets. I spent the next year sleeping in abandoned apartments, on top of roofs, and if I was lucky, the occasional couch. There are some hard learned lessons you have to pick up very fast in order to survive on the streets. For instance, you learn to take your shoes off and sleep with them under your head at night, or risk having them literally stolen off your feet. You learn how to bathe in sinks, what buildings you can sneak into to escape the Houston heat, and eventually you learn that in order to survive on the streets without resources, you have to enter this life.

I became a sex worker. Spent my nights trying to find safe places to sleep, and during the day, I walked up and down Houston's Boulevard and cruised truck stops on the north side turning tricks. Hoping, praying, somebody make me wanna be his John, might let me shower, maybe spend the night in an actual bed. My one saving grace were the other young people I met on the streets, Curtis, Kimmie, Skyler, and Sean. All having also spent time in foster care in some point in their lives. My relationship with Curtis was particularly bitter sweet, as we had previously been in two separate foster placements together, only to eventually both end up homeless on the streets.

Two months into my time on the streets, I learned that you could donate blood for money once a month at a local clinic if you were passable as straight. And sometimes we'd go together as a group. On my third visit to the clinic, I was given a letter informing me that I was no longer eligible to donate blood as my previous donation had tested positive for HIV. Johns will often offer you more money to have unprotected sex and with survival always a forefront of my mind, the difference between 50 dollars and a hundred dollars is very substantial for someone on the streets. That is why all of this laws, including the fact that in 2017 the Texas legislature passed a law to become one of ten states permitting child welfare agencies to discriminate against children and potential parents based on moral and religious objections.

Somehow during the government shift of Ann Richards, the Texas legislature passed a law that allows for former foster youth to attend college at state sponsored institutions of higher education for free. When I was homeless, one day I was downtown looking for air conditioning and a bathroom and I stumbled into this big building that was the University of Houston downtown. They were having an admissions fair and they were giving away free food. An admissions counselor struck up a conversation with me, and after telling her I had been in foster care, she told me about the Texas tuition waiver, and helped me apply for financial aid that same day.

At the time, the University of Houston downtown was the last open admissions university in the state. And within a handful of weeks, I received a two thousand dollar Pell Grant check that I used to get my very first apartment that I actually lived in until I graduated from college in 2015 with a Bachelor's degree in social work. Since then, I've earned a masters degree in public administration from Texas Southern University, I spent a year working a fellow for the Congressional LGBT Equality Caucus and I was in LA for Senator Murray before departing D.C. for my current job in New York City.

The only reason I'm here today is because of the investments people made to my life to help me become more than a statistic. I want you to imagine for a second the number of young people touched by the foster care system who could be walking the halls of Congress, instead of spending their lives on the streets, in prisons, or worse, in graves. If only they had the support of a family. Every child deserves the opportunity to be something more than what they come from, especially children who grow up in foster care. We need the Every Child Deserves A Family Act so that no child has to endure these realities. Realities of a world without a family, without community, without love.

That's why I support the bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114, which would end discrimination based on religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity in foster care. This bill, introduced by Congressman John Lewis, which has 185 cosponsors, would also provide states like Texas with resources to provide better services for LGBTQ foster youth, so that children in care now wouldn't have to go through the same hard times I did. I urge the Committee to support passage of HR 3114, and to require the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to end discrimination in its foster care programs, and to provide affirming services to every LGBTQ child in foster care, regardless of the religion of the agency serving the child.

Samantha Bannon

Jenkintown, PA

February 27, 2020

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Getting Turned Away from Fostering Refugee Children in PA

My wife and I live in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania. My wife is an emergency medicine physician and I formerly worked in the pharmaceutical industry but with the birth of our first daughter in June 2015, I became a stay at home mom. From the beginning, creating a family and children has been a cornerstone of our relationship, and being parents to our 2 daughters brings us immense joy. In early 2017, my wife and I were moved by the plight of refugee and unaccompanied children who were coming to the United States from areas of the world touched by war, economic strife, and extreme violence. We felt strongly that we could provide a loving, stable home as foster parents for a child escaping difficult circumstances. Our initial research online listed an organization located in our area, which is in the suburbs outside of the city limits of Philadelphia. I registered for an in-person information event hosted by them on March 7, 2017. Shortly after I arrived at their offices, I shared with the staff that we are a two-mom family. Unfortunately, the 3 staff members present were clearly uncomfortable with this information. Two staff members immediately left the room without addressing me. The third individual proceeded to tell me that the organization had never worked with a same-sex family before and she offered to provide me information about organizations in the area that worked with families like ours to become foster parents. I explained that we were specifically interested in fostering a refugee child and, as she knew, there were limited organizations that handled these placements. In response, she stated that refugee children have "already been through enough" and wouldn't be the best fit for placement in our family. These statements were made in front of many other prospective foster parents and garnered a fair bit of attention. I was embarrassed, and at that point, I said thank you for your time and left.

Being a parent is a responsibility that both my wife and I do not take lightly. We do not think our family structure causes either of our daughters any harm or difficulty. To have it insinuated that our family would be an additional burden to bear for a refugee child is inaccurate, insulting and embarrassing. As most organizations that handle the placement of refugee children are faith-based, we decided not to pursue any further inquiries fearing we would face the same humiliating and discriminatory treatment.

I oppose discrimination in foster care and adoption based on religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity because:

All children deserve the opportunity to live with a loving and stable family. Laws that allow discrimination discourage LGBT families from applying to foster and/or adopt. This is important because, as we know, same-sex couples are significantly more likely to foster and/or adopt than their heterosexual counterparts. LGBT couples are also more like to adopt children who are traditionally more difficult to place in homes (older children and children with disabilities).

Jonathan Trueblood

Southlake, TX



February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony to the Committee for the hearing on *The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights*. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, and to share why Congress must act to end discrimination in foster care and adoption, by passing Congressman John Lewis' bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114. I am submitting my testimony via Family Equality, an organization representing LGBTQ families and LGBTQ people wishing to form families.

Our story is long and complicated and took place prior to the Supreme Court's ruling on Gay Marriage. I'll try to be brief. After completing all requirements to adopt a child (i.e. background checks, home studies, etc.) we learned of a mother in Utah who was 6 weeks away from giving birth. We connected and she picked us to adopt her baby girl. Unfortunately, our adoption attorney, agency and social case worker informed us "this will never happen for you in Utah...of all the states Utah is the toughest for gay adoptions." The law in Utah stated no single couple living together could adopt. In order to meet this requirement, I had my domestic partner, Franco move out. Unfortunately, our attorney and case worker refused to work with us. They felt we were deceiving the courts. We proceeded without their help! This required starting over - new background checks, financial reviews, new home study to meet the requirements as an individual vs. couple, etc. My partner literally moved out of our home. We had 6 weeks before the due date or we thought; Sydney decided to come into the world three weeks early.

We flew to Salt Lake City, UT without legal representation, and our home study hadn't been performed. We were screwed! I recall saying to Franco, it'll be only by the grace of God we come home with this child. Her middle name is Grace because of that statement.

We arrived and see our daughter for the first time with tears flow down our faces! She's beautiful! Franco (my now husband) is a licensed attorney. He immediately reaches out to LAMBDA for help. They put us in contact with a local attorney. She initially agrees to represent us; however, admits

she's never had a case like ours and doesn't think we'll be successful. Two days later she calls and drops us, citing the legal environment for gay adoptions. Now we've been dropped by two attorneys.

While Franco is working to find an attorney, I'm working with a new case manager to get the home study done and all the other requirements. Franco finds a third attorney, but she's at a conference in Vegas and will not be back for 5 days. The hospital is ready to release the baby after 24 hours. We're in panic mode, stress is off the chart!

To solve the immediate problem, Franco became my attorney, he explained to the hospital representatives the adoption would be occurring in Texas and the state requires a 48-hour waiting period for the mother. The hospital agrees to allow the baby to stay an additional 24 hours. Franco gets copies of all the legal papers necessary to grant us temporary guardianship of Sydney. The next day the paperwork is signed by both mother and father and witnessed by hospital representatives.

Now we had to wait, because two states will be involved we are required to file with the Interstate Compact of the Placement of Children (ICPC). This is when Utah would review my paperwork and either approved it or not. If approved, the file moves to Texas and is reviewed as well. Either state can deny the transfer! Our attorney from Vegas is finally back in town. She helps with filing all forms, this is also her first time handling a file like ours and she isn't optimistic we'll be successful. The hurdle we worried the most about, getting Utah's approval, goes off without a hitch. The paperwork is forwarded to Texas for approval. We wait 10 long days in a hotel with a new born and still no word. Against the advice of our attorney, I finally call the State myself. I learn Texas has a problem, Franco's name has shown up on the mortgage. They want to know who he is and does he live at the residence. As I hear her asking these questions, I immediately have tears flowing down my face - it's over, they're not going to let us have Sydney. If I tell her the truth, she may be obligated to inform the Utah representative. Through tears, I explain to the clerk the truth - Yes, Franco does live with me and that we desperately want to adopt this little girl. I further explained we were simply trying to meet the requirements set forth by the state of Utah. She said that's a problem, because I'll need a background check on him. I smiled and said I actually have that. I remember her southern accent saying, "honey just send it to me and we'll get you guys home with that new baby girl!"

Once home, a new attorney is necessary to help with the adoption in the state of Texas. Again, we worked through LAMBDA and found a firm in Houston. Upon the advice, they were not comfortable with any of the courts in our geographical area. They explained it's the judges' sole decision to grant the adoption. So, we drive 5 hours to San Antonio and meet with a specific judge who is "gay friendly". He allows us to adopt Sydney.

I oppose discrimination in foster care and adoption based on religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity because:

Allowing state laws to exclude potential adoptive and foster parents because of their marital status, sexual orientation, or gender identity is not in the best interests of the child and reduces access to permanent, loving homes for these children. This aligns with the basic humanist principles such as fairness and compassion, and with empirical evidence: research clearly shows that children benefit most from being in a loving home with families, regardless of their sexual orientation or technical marital status.

I do believe religious organizations have the right to set up and offer adoption and foster services, but they do not have the right to offer government-funded services according to their religious convictions. Religious organizations are not compelled to accept public funds; however, if they do, they must play by the same rules as other organizations that receive taxpayer money. Religious convictions must never be subsidized by taxpayers.

Tom Higgins

Norfolk, VA



February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony to the Committee for the hearing on *The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights*. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, and to share why Congress must act to end discrimination in foster care and adoption, by passing Congressman John Lewis' bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114. I am submitting my testimony via Family Equality, an organization representing LGBTQ families and LGBTQ people wishing to form families.

For the most part, we received tremendous support from friends, family, and most care providers throughout the adoption process. Ours was a parental placement open adoption. The first time we experienced discrimination was when it was time to take our newborn daughter home from the hospital. She was three days old and her birth mom needed to stay hospitalized a few additional days due to minor complications from her epidural. When we arrived to bring our daughter home, the hospital social worker told us that there was a problem with our adoption paperwork and the baby needed to stay with the birth mom until she was discharged. The social worker then added the birth mom would have to be the one to carry our baby out of the hospital when she was discharged. She can only hand our baby over once we were off hospital grounds. The hospital social worker literally told us the birth mom could only hand over our child in the parking lot of the hospital. She made it feel like we were about to partake in an illicit drug transaction.

It was obvious to my husband and I during the birth process, that the hospital social worker had religious objections to same sex adoptions. She tried multiple times to convince the birth mother to reconsider allowing us to adopt the baby, even after we went through the entire process. The birth

mother signed away her parental rights the day after the birth of our daughter. We went through a rigorous and invasive process to adopt our beautiful little girl. We went through parenting classes; home visits by a social worker; credit, criminal and medical background checks; individual counseling and with the birth mother; not to mention the tens of thousands of dollars paid to the attorneys, and social workers for the home visits and reports.

We were involved in the process from the time the birth mother was four months pregnant up through the birth. The birth mother, 18 years old, homeless, and living with fetal alcohol syndrome had come to the conclusion on her own that she was not capable of caring for a child on her own. She was the one who decided to place her unborn child up for adoption. It was the birth mother who approached us about adopting her baby. She knew we would give her baby all the love and support she deserves throughout her life.

Sadly in the Commonwealth of Virginia, no legal adoption paperwork or agreement can be signed until after the birth of the child. My husband and I were emotionally and financially invested for more than five months. At any point during this process, the birth mother could have changed her mind and we would have no say. The birth mother had two weeks to change her mind even after she signed away her parental rights and the social worker did everything in her power to convince the birth mother to do just that.

If we were a heterosexual couple, we could have signed a surrogacy agreement with the birth mother while she was still pregnant. This process would have saved us more than \$20,000 in adoption costs and fees. Since we are a same sex couple, in order to make the adoption official in Virginia, we had to marry and wait until after the baby's birth before we could begin the legal process to adopt.

Thankfully the hospital social worker's efforts to thwart our adoption did not succeed. Once the social worker refused to allow my husband and I to take our daughter home from the hospital, our adoption attorney spoke with the hospital's attorneys. A few hours after the attorneys spoke, the hospital president called us directly to apologize for the social work's actions and told us we could come back to the hospital to take our daughter home.

We celebrated our beautiful little girl's third birthday recently. She has changed our lives for the better, made us a family, and shown us what unconditional love truly is. She is loved, cared for, smart, and the happiest child we have ever met. Although the adoption process is slanted against same sex couples and ours was a challenging process that literally took 14 months to complete, we would gladly do it again to ensure our daughter completed our family.

I oppose discrimination in foster care and adoption based on religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity because:

Love defines a family and children are not born to hate or discriminate against others. Discrimination, racism, etc. is something that is taught, something my child will NEVER learn from her parents.

Alex Fischer
Brattleboro, VT



February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony to the Committee for the hearing on *The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights*. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, and to share why Congress must act to end discrimination in foster care and adoption, by passing Congressman John Lewis' bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114. I am submitting my testimony via Family Equality, an organization representing LGBTQ families and LGBTQ people wishing to form families.

I adopted my kid this year. Previously, one of his foster homes had been his family's pastor and wife. Things were going fine and were on track for adoption until he came out as bisexual. This caused a lot of trauma for my kid, it resulted in a suicide attempt and he was placed in a group home for over 4 months. Part of the extraordinary length of his stay at the group home was the lack of foster families and parents who were trans-friendly and could fully support him.

After 15 months of fostering my kiddo, we signed adoption papers on December 28th. I met my kid at a summer camp for queer and trans youth. I identify as genderqueer and have volunteered for the last four years at this camp. About a month after camp, I received a phone call that one of my campers from the summer needed a new foster home immediately. He is Puerto Rican and trans-masculine and had come out as trans in the last year.

As a gender non-conforming adult that is deeply embedded in queer and trans community, and queer communities of color, I have been able to not only support my kid but help him thrive as a trans youth. I have created a loving community of queer and trans adults that he can relate to. As a queer adult, I am able to better advocate for my kid because his struggles are my struggles, too.

Additionally, my kid has been supportive, accepting and loving of me as a gender nonconforming parent. My kid regularly advocates for me and consistently acknowledges me as his parent, instead of as a mother or father.

We are a beautiful queer/trans family that deeply loves and supports each other, that had built a strong and thriving queer community. And, as a queer/trans family, we are also a huge resource to other queer and trans youth within the foster system who are still discriminated against.

I oppose discrimination in foster care and adoption based on religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity because:

Our youth need all the love and support possible as they figure out who they are, and most importantly, that they are worthy of being loved. So many foster youth have faced such trauma and need to be assured that they are incredible, beautiful, worthy and lovable. Not because they are straight or cis or white or Christian, but because they are children.

Curt Queyrouze

Ogden, UT



February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

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My husband and I were the second gay couple to adopt through the foster care program in the State of Utah, welcoming our children into our home as foster parents in May 2015 and completing the adoption process in November 2015. Our experience with the Utah Foster Care Foundation and the Utah Department of Child and Family Services exceeded our expectations. We were encouraged throughout the process and felt welcomed and respected. I am writing today to support the positive impact that adding LGBTQ families into the pool can have for the children.

Simply put, love and security are the foundation for healthy outcomes for the children. These attributes are not "owned" solely by religious or heterosexual individuals. The best interests of the children should always be forefront and I believe that our story of success offers an example of the power of family, no matter the gender makeup or religiosity.

After reviewing the kids' files, who were 4 and 2 years old at the time, we got a sense of physical abuse and a lot of neglect up to this point. The children had been homeless with their birth-mom for a period, couch-surfing and living in transitional housing.

Today, our kids are 8 & 6 and are as happy and stable as any of their peers. Our daughter has pivoted from an aggressive personality to one of the most caring and empathetic kids around. Our son, who was feared to have developmental issues has just been recommended for an advanced-learning magnet school. He is in kindergarten and reading at a second-grade level. He is funny, bright and loving.

In sum, if you remove couples like us from the potential pool of families, you are lowering the chances of positive outcomes for the children. Discrimination of this kind certainly hurts us by denying our rights, but more importantly, it harms the children. The positive story of our family is just one of many. The most important consideration should be improving the chances of success for all of the children.

This is a social issue of great magnitude. In 2017, nearly 20,000 young people “aged out” of foster care across the country – placing them at higher risk of involvement with the criminal justice system, homelessness, unemployment, and being trafficked. Adoption and parenting should focus on creating safe, stable, loving forever homes for kids. All child welfare decisions should be made in the best interests of the child, not based on the religious beliefs of child services agencies or workers.

LGBTQ people are more likely to adopt older children and children with disabilities – children who have the most difficulty finding forever homes. “License to discriminate” laws allow child services agencies to refuse to place LGBTQ youth - who are overrepresented in the foster care system - with affirming and accepting parents. These laws also mean that a worker could place an LGBTQ youth with a family that intends to place them in harmful conversion therapy. 19% of foster youth identify as LGBTQ and report twice the rate of poor treatment while in care, as well as greater rates of placement in group homes, multiple placements, hospitalization for emotional reasons, involvement in the criminal justice system, and homelessness.

Children of color are overrepresented in the foster care system, constituting over half of children in care. States are required to recruit a pool of foster and adoptive parents that mirrors the population of kids in care. More than a third of same-sex couples raising children are people of color. Marginalized youth in the child welfare system, including those who are LGBTQ, Indian or Alaska Native, and youth of color, deserve culturally competent, safe, and supportive care.

Schylar Baber

Montana



Testimony of Schylar Baber

Submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Government Reform for the Hearing on The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights

February 27, 2020

Dear Chairwoman Maloney, Chairman Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony to the Committee for the hearing on *The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights*. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, and to share why Congress must act to end discrimination in foster care and adoption, by passing Congressman John Lewis' bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114. I am submitting my testimony via Family Equality, an organization representing LGBTQ families and LGBTQ people wishing to form families, and FosterClub, the national network for youth in foster care.

My name is Schylar Baber. I grew up in the Montana foster care system. Currently, I reside in Washington, DC because I am the Executive Director of Voice for Adoption.

As I said, I grew up in the foster system and I would say that there's a crisis in our country right now; we have half a million children in foster care and over a hundred thousand are waiting to be adopted. Once I was removed from my biological family, I went through eleven foster homes. That's a lot of different schools, a lot of different churches, a lot of different experiences.

I was taught to hide my identity. I found out early on that if I really showed who I was, that could be weaponized and used against me. That who I was, was not acceptable by the standards within Montana. That every time I showed a piece of vulnerability or a piece of emotion, that it was

something that was wrong. I was labeled as gay before I ever knew that I was actually gay. I didn't understand what that meant. All I knew was that I was just experiencing not having a family and moving about once a year, every year.

So I experienced the eleven foster homes, but I also experienced two group homes and two residential treatment centers and over 50 different respite providers. Respite providers are like weekend foster homes that are intended to provide you a safe haven away and give foster children and their caregivers a break from each other. Children in the system that experience abuse and neglect are going to grow up to have some issues that they have to overcome. And so respites are intended to give you a little bit of relief.

At the age of 12, I had the opportunity to be adopted by my sixth grade music teacher, who saw me in a really tough foster home. And when you're a teacher, it's a tough situation to advocate for children that are being abused and neglected. They walk a very fine line. So he offered to adopt me, but I was denied an option because my foster home at the time did not like him, and because he was a single male. And single male, often meant that you might be gay or you could be a predator or worse.

So, through the system, I experienced more foster homes and I aged out of the system at the age of 18. But before that it kind of got worse. I was at a foster home that was Foursquare Evangelical and I had a toy that was given to me by another person and I was crying over it. I wasn't crying because it was romantic or sexual, I was crying because I broke the toy - he only toy that had ever been given to me by another kid and I was really upset. And my foster mom came in and said, "What are you a faggot?" And I said, "Well, what if I am?" That was really stupid.

I was forced into conversion therapy. Every day after school, I would have to go to an elder at my church and hear how I have a demon possessing my soul, how that demon has infected me and if I don't cast it out, I'm going to go to hell. I'm going to burn in hell for the rest of my life or afterlife. And that anybody who supports me, anybody who tells me I'm okay, anybody who loves me and chooses to accept that demon, is also going to go to hell with me. And so I was taught that I was wrong and for the person I loved or the people I would come to love that, that person was not okay. And that was a lot of doubt and it was a lot of fear. There was a lot of anger and it caused a lot of confusion. I ran away from that home, especially after it became physically abusive.

When I aged out of the system, I was hardened. I was offered again by that adoptive father to adopt me, but at this time I said, "No, I don't want to be adopted. I don't need a family." Because I hardened myself to the thought that I'm not going to open myself up to this again. I'm just going to do this on my own. But I grew up. And I realized that it's not that I need a family, because we all need somebody out there. It's that there's more to this world than being alone. There's more than constantly fighting for survival.

My whole life would be different if the Every Child Deserves a Family Act would have been law. I would have suffered less trauma, less abuse. I would have been adopted earlier and had a family and had half of my placements removed. I would have years less of trying to figure out who I was as an adult and most importantly to me, I would have the ability to fight back to the people that had hurt me.

This is the solution. We need more families. We have more children in care and not enough homes to place them in. We have people that are being hurt and traumatized by a system that is intended to protect them. It's wrong. When you accept children and you take them into your custody, you have a duty. Foster care is the short term safe haven. It's intended to triage. It's not intended to house them permanently. I come from a generation known as the children who wait. For we take kids out of their homes and place them in the system without ever intending to find them permanency. We need to change things.

That's why I support the bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114, which would end discrimination based on religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity in foster care. This bill, introduced by Congressman John Lewis, which has 185 cosponsors, would also provide states like Montana with resources to provide better services for LGBTQ foster youth, so that children in care now wouldn't have to go through the same hard times I did. If the Every Child Deserves a Family Act can open up more homes, provide more opportunity, reduce trauma, and reduce practically every kind of discrimination you can think of is happening to kids today, which still exists and is happening in every single state, whether your state acknowledges that it's happening or not. I urge the Committee to support passage of HR 3114, and to require the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to end discrimination in its foster care programs, and to provide affirming services to every LGBTQ child in foster care, regardless of the religion of the agency serving the child.

Tristan Torres

Las Vegas, NV



Testimony of Tristan Torres

Submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Government Reform for the Hearing on The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights

February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony to the Committee for the hearing on *The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights*. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, and to share why Congress must act to end discrimination in foster care and adoption, by passing Congressman John Lewis' bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114. I am submitting my testimony via Family Equality, an organization representing LGBTQ families and LGBTQ people wishing to form families, and FosterClub, the national network for youth in foster care.

When you allow a system to target LGBTQ+ people specifically, there's a problem. Children and youth aren't able to choose the agency or organization that serves them. There's no guarantee that the child an agency serves will be straight. If you aren't prepared to take in an LGBTQ+ youth, you shouldn't be taking any youth at all. It's a simple matter of safety. I spent 9 months in the foster care system in Nevada, entering when I was 16 years old. My caseworker from the state agency discriminated against me. He told me that I couldn't receive any medical services to support my transition until I was 18 years old, and because of him, I attended multiple high schools in those 9 months. He was later placed under investigation for being transphobic.

I had two sets of foster parents who had no idea what to do with me as a transgender foster kid. They thought they were prepared, but they weren't. I was placed with a foster parent that locked me in her room, berated me for being transgender, and forbade me from speaking to her biological children. After pleading for help from my caseworker and attorney and not receiving it, another adult helped me and I was placed in a new home, but the discrimination continued. After an inciting incident with a family member learning that I was transgender, my foster parents withheld food from me, and I ended up literally thrown out of their house with my belongings in trash bags.

There are a disproportionate number of LGBTQ+ youth in the system. When we don't prepare the foster homes or juvenile justice system on how to interact, help and not damage LGBTQ+ children further, children will suffer. We need affirming placements with parents who can support our needs and who understand how to care for LGBTQ+ foster youth. Much of the instability I experienced in foster care was due to the lack of inclusivity at every level - from foster home to caseworker to supervisor. Fortunately, I was able to find support at The Center (an LGBTQ+ organization in Las Vegas) and led a push for Nevada to include mandatory LGBTQ+ training for foster parents. Allowing agencies to discriminate against LGBTQ+ parents would mean we have less prospective foster parents. This would shut the door on children and youth needing support. Limiting homes (when there's already a shortage) would mean children and youth are stuck in temporary placements - lingering in limbo for no logical reason. We must do better.

Lucina Kayee

St. Paul, Minnesota



Testimony of Lucina Kayee

Submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Government Reform for the Hearing on The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights

February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony to the Committee for the hearing on *The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights*. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, and to share why Congress must act to end discrimination in foster care and adoption, by passing Congressman John Lewis' bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114. I am submitting my testimony via Family Equality, an organization representing LGBTQ families and LGBTQ people wishing to form families, and FosterClub, the national network for youth in foster care.

My name is Lucina Kayee, and I'm from St Paul, Minnesota.

Not every foster child finds a home. There are the forgotten ones, those who grew up in the system as faceless beings with trauma that stays with them longer than the social workers who swore to protect them. For both LGBTQ and Two-Spirit youth and parents - as well as religious minorities, discrimination in foster care is rampant. Take the 2015 death of six-year-old black foster child Kendrea Johnson who reportedly took her own life after experiencing abuse and neglect in her foster home, and the story of 15-year-old Devonte Hart, who presumably died on March 26 after his adoptive mother allegedly killed him and his five siblings.

Many Black foster children and foster children of color are forced to hide the abuse they face to make sure they are able to survive the traumatizing war of the foster care system. Just like many queer and Two-Spirit foster children, many of whom are my friends, I learned to camouflage myself to navigate through this system.

My childhood was filled with war and terror. I grew up in a war-torn country, then fought my own battle by accepting my identity as a queer black Muslim girl while in the U.S. foster care system. I was born in Liberia during its first civil war. My family and I escaped the war and came to the U.S.

in 2002, but trauma followed us. My step-father was unable to take care of me, which forced me into the foster care system. I went through one facility almost 20 times over the course of four years before finding a home.

In this system, I grew up around openly LGBTQ and Two-Spirit black foster children, and I saw first-hand how they were treated. I was fearful of becoming one of those forced into residential treatment facilities, just for being open about who I was. So I lied about my identity, and told everyone I was heterosexual and Christian. At 10 years old, I started to question my sexuality, but I refused to put myself in danger of being pushed into the juvenile justice system by making any waves while in foster care. Many foster parents refuse to have LGBTQ and Two-Spirit foster children – a group overrepresented in the system – in their homes. I was not willing to add my name to the list. (What’s more, Human Rights Campaign found that 78% LGBTQ youth were “removed or ran away from their foster placements as a result of hostility toward their sexual orientation or gender identity.”)

The only person in my life who accepted all of my identities was my aunt. I told her that I was queer when I turned 15. To my surprise, she was more understanding of me than I was of myself. “You are the child of the Sapó people, you are smart and Allah loves you even if you feel that the world is against you. He will always be there to protect you,” she would say to me when I started to doubt myself. These words were the only thing to remind me that someone in my life loved me even if I was unwilling to publicly show who I was.

Outside of this relationship, I kept my identity to myself until 2014, when I came out to my close friends and family. I was starting a new chapter in my life. I was finally attending my dream school, and I was no longer living in a foster home. I felt like I was finally in control and that I would never allow anyone to take that control away from me. I was finally free. I started to organize with the local organizations and it made me realize that queer black Muslims exist – in fact, they were living all around me. My confidence began to grow each time I was around people like me, people who I thought did not exist.

I finally realized the power that my voice and story held. With two other black foster girls, I started a foster youth organization called MY Generation, a youth-run organization that embraces the collaboration between young people of color and their circle of support.

As I grow older and learn more about myself and my ancestors, I start to realize that I am my ancestors’ wildest dream. Not only am I paving the way for queer black Muslim foster youth but also for LGBTQ and Two-Spirit youth in foster care. I’ve realized that my blackness and my queerness go together and I will never be willing to separate the two. I will continue to create pathways for black foster children and youth of color in care who are being silenced by the same system that was created to protect them.

When you support the Every Child Deserves a Family Act, you are saying to your constituents and to this nation that you believe in protecting the rights of all people especially our children regardless of their religious beliefs, sexual orientation and gender identity.

Thank you

April and Ginger Aaron-Brush
Alabama



February 27, 2020

Dear Chair Maloney, Chair Raskin, Ranking Member Jordan, and Ranking Member Roy:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony to the Committee for the hearing on *The Administration's Religious Liberty Assault on LGBT Rights*. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, and to share why Congress must act to end discrimination in foster care and adoption, by passing Congressman John Lewis' bipartisan Every Child Deserves a Family Act, HR 3114. I am submitting my testimony via Family Equality, an organization representing LGBTQ families and LGBTQ people wishing to form families.

We are a married lesbian couple in Alabama with an eleven-year-old adoptive daughter. For years, before marriage equality was the law of the land, we were turned away by adoption agencies because we weren't married. During these same years, over 1,800 children in Alabama's foster care system were waiting to be adopted.

We finally found an agency that would work with us and adopted our daughter Avery. In 2017, Alabama passed a law allowing private adoption agencies to turn away prospective parents based on their religious beliefs. Since then, we have again attempted to become foster parents to one of Alabama's thousands of foster children needing a home - and were turned away.

Nine other states have also passed laws allowing taxpayer-funded foster care and adoption agencies to turn away prospective parents based on their religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or marital status - despite the fact that tens of thousands of children in foster care in these states are waiting to be adopted.