



Testimony before
Human Resources Subcommittee - Committee on Ways and Means
Hearing on Adoption Incentives - Wednesday February 27th, 2013
There Is No Safety or Well-Being Without Permanent Parents At Exit End of the System

Hi there! I am Pat O'Brien, Founder and Current Executive Director of *You Gotta Believe! The Older Child Adoption & Permanency Movement, Inc* an organization that first and foremost considers itself a homelessness prevention program. The way we prevent homelessness is to find permanent parents for teens and young adults before they are discharged from the foster care system to no one but themselves.

I want to thank you so much for allowing me to testify on behalf of *You Gotta Believe* before the Human Resources Subcommittee of the Committee on Ways and Means as you are addressing the very important topic of increasing adoptions from foster care through the Adoption Incentives program.

When I started *You Gotta Believe* back in 1995 I noticed an interesting statistic when homeless populations were surveyed. In every survey I looked at, over half the homeless reported having grown up in foster care as youth. They had actually come into our system first and foremost for their own safety and well-being only to be placed in harm's way when they were discharged from the very same system. I believe this sad result is the direct product of two primary barriers.

TWO PRIMARY BARRIERS:

The first barrier is simple: Lack of belief that we can find permanent parents for teens and young adults as they are aging out of foster care. This "lack of" belief keeps laws from being created that would mandate concurrent planning at the exit end of the system. My over 25 years of experience has taught me that our child welfare system must never stop recruiting permanent parents for children of any age that are at risk of aging out to our nation's streets.

And this leads to **the second barrier**: A Child Welfare Permanency Planning Goal call: Some Other Planned Permanent Living Arrangement Which May Include a Residential Education Program (SOPPLA-WMI- A-REP.) Many in our field refer to this permanency planning goal as **Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement** or simply APPLA.

APPLA is focused on preparing youth for adulthood. APPLA focuses on skills development and teaching youngsters the important skills to survive in the world on their own. And though skills development and preparing for adulthood is very important, there are still very few, if any, youth in the general population (including yours and my children over the age of 21) making it on their own without the help of their parents.

For example, did you know that the overwhelming majority of 22 year old college graduates who comes from fairly well-off one or two-parent families return home to their parents after they graduate from college with a four year bachelor's degree?

Also, did you know that according to the US Census the average age a youth leaves home in the United States of America is 26?

But we, as a child welfare system, are putting youth between the ages of 18 and 21 in harm's way without even trying to get them permanent parents before they are discharged from our foster care system because there is no law that mandates even the effort.

SO HOW DO WE FIND PERMANENT PARENTS FOR AGING OUT YOUTH:

If our law makers ever decide to have concurrent planning at the exit end of the system whereby we not only prepare youth for adulthood by teaching them independent living skills, but we also simultaneously mandate the recruitment of permanent parents for them as well, *You Gotta Believe* can be very helpful in showing the world how relatively easy it is to find those permanent parents for our aging out youth. *You Gotta Believe* utilizes a three prong approach to finding lifetime parents for aging out youth that we call our *Saving F.A.C.E* {**F**riends, **A**cquaintances, and **C**ommunity **E**ducation.} *Approach to Finding Permanent Parents for Youth --- Barring No One.*

1) The Friend's Approach:

You see, once we believe that a permanent parent must be found for every youth before they age out of the foster care system, and we legally mandate that effort, the first place we look for this permanent parent is talking to the constructive adults who are already in an individual youth's life. People such as:

Social Workers; Employers and co-worker; Facebook "Friends"; Coaches or Other Extracurricular people; Former babysitters; Former Foster Parents and/or former foster parents neighbors, friends, and family members; Unexplored Maternal and/or Paternal relatives; People re-met at family Funerals; Child Care Staff; Administrative Staff; School Teachers & Other School Personnel; Therapists; Volunteers & Mentor;, AWOL Resources; God Parents; and parents of best friends, co-workers, & teammates (This is a just a partial list of lifetime parents we have found and adoptive placements we have made over the years at You Gotta Believe!)

And when we identify someone known to the youth we ask that person to take a 10 week learning and preparation experience (we call our learning experience A-OKAY or **A**dopting **O**lder **K**ids **A**nd **Y**outh) to see if making a lifetime commitment to this youth they so care about is something that they can do. Our statistics and research show this is the single most effective way to recruit a lifetime parent for a youth aging out of care. During a four year period under a Federal Demonstration grant it took nearly 1,000 prospective applicants from the general public to walk through our doors for an orientation to get 37 youth a life time parent. During that same four year period it only took 154 prospective applicants to walk through our doors who knew a teen to get 83 youth placed into a lifetime family. This approach is a simple highly efficient means of recruiting permanent parents that lead to the creation of permanent adoptive families for youth aging out between ages 18 and 21.

2) The Acquaintances Approach:

There are many youth in the system where it is believed by the people around them that they have no constructive adults in their lives that one can reach out to. For these youth we set up opportunities for them to

share the same time and space with our prospective and certified families. We do this by bringing youth into our A-OKAY parent preparation classes as consultants to teach our prospective families what it is like to be a teen growing up in foster care system. Many families who came forward having no interest in adopting teens had decided that a teen on our panel was someone that they could adopt. Dozens and dozens of youth have been placed as a direct result of sharing the same time and space and becoming acquaintances with the prospective and certified families who were taking our A-OKAY classes. This is the second best way we have found to find permanent parents for the oldest of the older youth in care.

3) **The Community Education Approach**

Years ago our organization realized that we were having little success trying to sell what we were doing to the general public in 15 or 30 second sound bites. That is why we created our own media, both TV and radio. One half hour at a time dedicated to the need to find permanent parents for teens and young adults about to be discharged from the foster care system. These broadcasts introduced the general public to the teens in need of families and the permanent parents who adopted the teens. In addition we had special guests who served both populations talking about the special needs of both populations.

We do a cable access program that anyone can watch while it live-streams in Brooklyn, New York, where our main office is. This broadcast serves a local purpose of recruiting local parents and a more global purpose by introducing and inspiring the rest of the world by meeting the wonderful youth who need homes and the parents who adopt them in one half hour of thoughtful interviews and conversations. In addition, we do a live radio broadcast every Sunday evening which is also live streamed on the internet and archived on a website. All the links to access these important broadcasts are included in my written statement.

Our Community Education efforts earned us the Adoption Excellence Award in 2007 from the Department of Health and Human Services in the category of **Media/Public Awareness of Adoption From Foster Care**.

*To access our Television program website: <http://bricartsmedia.org/community-media/bcat-tv-network>
And then click on Channel 2 every and any Thursday at 12 noon and again at 8pm Eastern Time.*

To access our radio program website: www.am1240wgbb.com every Sunday evening from 8-8:30pm Eastern Time. Should you miss the broadcast it will be archived by the end of the following week and can be listen to at www.adoptingteensandtweens.com Should you be in the New York City area you can listen on the radio on 1240 on the AM dial if you are in Nassau County, Western Suffolk County, most parts of Queens, many parts of Brooklyn, and the New Jersey Shore.

WHERE SHOULD ADOPTION INCENTIVES AWARDS BE RE-INVESTED?:

There are two equally important areas where re-investing adoption incentive funds would be extraordinary useful as we place older youth with permanent parents to create life time families through adoption.

The first is funding to continue efforts to recruit the very permanent parents that we know are out there for each and every youth. Re-investing these incentive dollars to utilize the three prong strategies noted above

would be an impactful way to get more youth into permanent families **before** their discharge from the system. Parents and families are the foundation and springboard to every child's future. Parents and families give every youth access to the village we so often talk about needing to raise children. It sure does take a village to raise a child **but only if** that child has a parent in that village to provide the foundation he or she needs. This is equally true for the 18, 19, 20, or 21 year olds as it would be for an infant, toddler or latency age child.

Secondly, we must support families after their youth move in. Almost all the youth at the age range we place have had serious trauma in their lives. We prepare parents for what to expect, but we must also be there to support them during their hard times after their new sons and daughters move in. Funds should be re-invested to help these families maintain their commitments during the inevitable episodes and outbreaks that surface due to each youth's individual trauma. The more we support these newly created families, the stronger these families will remain.

If we can provide these two basic adoption services, then each youth will have what the child welfare system promised them when they first came into foster care: and that promise was a home that provides safety, the opportunity for well-being, and a permanent parent and family who will be there for them long after their years in foster care are over.

I want to thank Chairman Rep. Dave Reichert and Ranking member Rep. Lloyd Doggett and the rest of the sub-committee on Human Resources for giving me the opportunity to represent *You Gotta Believe! The Older Child Adoption & Permanency Movement, Inc* at today's hearing.

Some readings I would recommend include the following (feel free to e-mail at ygbpat@msn.com if you would like for me to e-mail any of these papers or articles to you):

Avery, Rosemary J., *An Examination of Theory and Promising Practice for Achieving Permanency for Teens Before They Age Out of Foster Care*, *Children & Youth Services Review* 32 (2010) pgs. 399-408

O'Brien, Patrick, *When You Take the P.A.R.E.N.T. Out of PERMANENT You're Left With M.(ostly) N.(ot) E.(nough)* Paper written for a workshop presented at a North American Council on Adoptable Children Conference.

O'Brien, Patrick, *Youth Homelessness and the Lack of Adoptive and Other Permanent Parental Planning For Teens In Foster Care: Preventing Homelessness Through Parenting*. Paper written for a workshop presented at a North American Council on Adoptable Children Conference.

O'Brien, Patrick *Unconditional Commitment: The Only Love That Matters ... to Teens* An Article written and published in *Fostering Families Today* and a variety of other publications and newsletters.

Respectfully Submitted by,

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