

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

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Good afternoon Chairman Davis, Ranking Member Walorski and members of the committee. My name is William C. Bell and I am the president and CEO of Casey Family Programs. Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building communities of hope for children and families across America.

Casey Family Programs was founded in 1966 and has been analyzing, developing and informing best practices in child welfare and child well-being for over 53 years. We partner with child welfare agencies, community residents, business leaders, government leaders, non-profit organizations, and philanthropic organizations in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. We also partner with 16 American Indian tribal nations and with the federal government to support practices and policies that increase the safety and success of children and strengthen the resilience of families.

I thank you for the opportunity to be here today to talk about the resilience of families and the critical role that fathers play in the lives of their children. My testimony will highlight three key points:

1. Fathers play an essential role in a child's physical, emotional and social development throughout their child's lifetime. However, all too often, child serving systems discount the importance of a father's involvement in the lives of their children.
2. There are effective programs that are supportive of the needs of fathers – and parents overall – that need our attention and support.
3. The passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act has the potential to transform how states and tribes engage and support families, including fathers. States and tribes are very enthusiastic, but there are barriers to implementation that need timely attention and resolution.

The Role of Fathers in Positive Child Development

Casey Family Programs has learned from research - and from providing direct service for over five decades - that most children grow up to have better outcomes in life when they are nurtured and cared for by their own families.

We have also learned that fathers and their engagement is critical to achieving this result. Fathers have a significant role to play in children's physical, emotional, and social development and they are essential partners in the prevention of maltreatment and achievement of timely permanence for children involved in the child welfare system.

Studies have highlighted myriad benefits of father involvement for child safety and well-being¹:

- Non-resident fathers may play a role in ameliorating the circumstances that led to abuse.
- Non-resident fathers' involvement with their children is associated with a higher likelihood of a reunification outcome and a lower likelihood of an adoption outcome.
- Children with highly involved non-resident fathers are discharged from foster care more quickly than those whose fathers have less or no involvement.

For children who are reunited with a parent, usually their mother, higher levels of non-resident father involvement are associated with a substantially lower likelihood of subsequent maltreatment allegations. Data show that outcomes for children improve through high quality relationships and engagement between fathers and their children. We know from our work, from research, but most important from talking with youth directly, that having an involved father confirms to a child that they are loved, provides a child with emotional support and enhanced self-esteem, increases a child's intellectual and moral development, and provides increased opportunities for academic success.²

According to a 2013 analysis on the influence of father involvement on child welfare permanency outcomes, children have a higher risk for poor psychosocial outcomes when their fathers are absent or not involved. Unfortunately, these children are more likely to live in poverty, drop out of school, and engage in risky behaviors like using alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs.

Unfortunately, child-serving systems often discount the importance of a father's involvement in the lives of their children. Only 54% of the approximately 400,000 children in foster care had contact with their fathers in the year leading up to the analysis, compared to 72% of children from the general population. While data on the involvement of fathers whose children are in out-of-home placements is scarce, the study documented that when fathers are involved, their children have shorter lengths of stay in foster care and they are more likely to be reunited with birth parents or placed with relatives after foster care.³

Too often many government systems focus on payment of child support as the non-custodial fathers' only critical responsibility and method of connection with supporting the rearing of their children. Even as initiatives and investments designed to build protective factors among children have grown, father-specific programs and resources have continued to be developed at the margins, if at all.⁴ One example of effective programming in this area is parent partner programs. This type of program has been continuously identified by parents as providing critical support and assistance to them when navigating the child welfare system. Having fathers with first-hand experience serving as peer/parent mentors to fathers currently navigating the system

¹ Please see our Questions from the Field document "How can we better engage fathers in prevention" for additional information. Available at: <https://www.casey.org/engage-fathers-prevention/>

² Martinez, K., Rider, F., Cayce, N., Forssell, S., Poirier, J., Hunt, S., Crawford, G., & Sawyer, J. (2013). A Guide for Father Involvement in Systems of Care. Retrieved from https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/AIR_Fatherhood_Guide_061413_0.pdf

³ Information cited from a Children and Youth Services Review article, The influence of father involvement on child welfare permanency outcomes: A secondary data analysis, by Tanya M. Coakley

⁴ National Fatherhood Initiative. (2016). Mapping Father-Involvement Programs and Resources to the Protective Factors White Paper. Retrieved from <https://www.fatherhood.org/hubfs/Father-Involvement-Protective-Factors-Whitepaper-070716.pdf>

can be an effective approach to help identify and address challenges, build on family strengths, provide a vital social connection, and contribute to positive outcomes for children and families⁵.

While financial support is important, data shows that outcomes for children improve not by virtue of financial support alone, but also through high-quality relationships and safe and healthy interactions between fathers and children.⁶ Engaging fathers and connecting them with the right kinds of services and supports can directly impact the way fathers contribute to their child's development, yet there are a number of issues that impact the experiences that fathers have across multiple systems and influence their ability and capacity to engage in meaningful and consistent ways.⁷

These potential barriers include:

1. Significant systemic bias against father engagement in child welfare (e.g., case names reflect mother);
2. Insufficient efforts to locate and involve non-custodial fathers;
3. Gate-keeping actions that reduce access between fathers and their children;
4. Circumstances that result in non-custodial fathers being less accessible (i.e., incarceration, homelessness, impairment by substance abuse, military enlistment, etc.);
5. Lack of father-specific services and supports;
6. Dynamics around domestic violence and fathers who have committed acts of abuse towards involving their children.⁸

In spite of these potential barriers, many jurisdictions have highlighted and implemented numerous strategies to strengthen father engagement⁹. These include:

- Organizational assessment and planning for enhanced father involvement to help guide the development of fatherhood approaches and initiatives in child-serving systems
- Dedicated staff to support fathers. One example is the father engagement specialists employed at the Allegheny County (Pennsylvania) Department of Human Services' Office of Children, Youth and Families
- An effective process for locating and engaging fathers, such as the development and implementation of a robust family search and engagement framework, that includes identification, making initial contact, family group conferencing, assessment, safety planning and permanency planning.

⁵ What Parents Say About Prevention and Early Intervention. National Alliance for Children's Trust and Prevention Funds, 2017.

http://www.bpnn.ctfalliance.org/BPNN%20Brief_Prevention%20Strategies%20That%20Work.pdf

⁶ Please see our Questions from the Field document "How can we better engage fathers in prevention" for additional information. Available at: <https://www.casey.org/engage-fathers-prevention/>

⁷ Gordon, D.M., Oliveros, A., Hawes, S.W., Iwamoto, D.K., & Rayford, B.S. (2012). Engaging fathers in child protection services: A review of factors and strategies across ecological systems. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(8), 1399–1417.

⁸ Sandstrom, H., Gearing, M., Peters, H.E., Heller, C., Healy, O., & Pratt, E. (2015). Approaches to Father Engagement and Fathers' Experiences in Home Visiting Programs (OPRE Report #2015-103). Retrieved from <https://cantasd.acf.hhs.gov/wp-content/uploads/Approaches-to-Father-Engagement-and-Fathers-Experiences-in-Home-Visiting-Programs.pdf>

⁹ Please see our Questions from the Field document "How can we better engage fathers in prevention" for additional information. Available at: <https://www.casey.org/engage-fathers-prevention/>

- Development of a network of providers in the communities focused on fathers as well as a network of support to fathers whose children are involved with the child welfare system
- Home visiting programs that include fathers. Home visiting programs tend to focus on pregnant women and mothers of young children, however, some home visiting programs are implementing strategies to better engage fathers in these important services.

Promising Efforts to Build Connections and Strengthen Families

Casey Family Programs relies on alumni of foster care, birth parents and foster parents alike to inform its work with the authentic voice of those who have lived experience with the child protection system. Birth parent and foster parent partnerships that are inclusive and supportive of all parents of children in out-of-home care, including fathers, can improve relationships and communication between fathers and their children; between fathers and co-parents of their children; and between fathers and child welfare agency staff.

Strengthening and supporting families to be resilient and to have sources of support is a proactive approach to prevent child abuse and neglect. Parents have identified some of the prevention strategies that were helpful to them and other parents in their neighborhoods. All of these programs incorporate strategies that help parents in building protective factors to enable them to parent more effectively, even under stress. These programs include¹⁰:

- Family Resource Centers (FRCs), which are known by many different names across the country, such as family centers, family success centers, family support centers and parent/child centers. FRCs provide an array of activities and programs developed to reflect the specific needs, cultures and interests of the families served.
- Parent education programs which typically focus on developing positive discipline approaches, increasing knowledge of child development, and promoting positive parent-child interactions.
- Parent mutual-support groups which offer parents the opportunity to develop, practice, and evaluate their own parenting skills in a supportive environment.

Casey Family Programs also works directly with children and families to develop and demonstrate effective, practical solutions to safely reduce the need for foster care, improve child well-being, and secure safe and lifelong families for every child in our care. We operate nine field offices in five states – Arizona, California, Idaho, Texas, and Washington – that provide direct services to urban, suburban and rural communities.

We know from our own direct work with children and families how critical it is to involve fathers - and paternal family members - in the lives of their children through case planning, family finding efforts and permanency conversations. At the core of our Case Practice Model is a philosophy built on the belief that children thrive when they are an integral part of their families and communities.

Children have a profound need to know who they are and where they came from. They also have a need to feel connected to people who look like them, share the same history, and enjoy the same traditions and cultures. For these reasons, our Case Practice Model prioritizes family-

¹⁰ What Parents Say About Prevention and Early Intervention. National Alliance for Children's Trust and Prevention Funds, 2017.

http://www.bpnn.ctfalliance.org/BPNN%20Brief_Prevention%20Strategies%20That%20Work.pdf

based and family-focused work that serves the whole family, including fathers, paternal relatives, and maternal relatives.

In child welfare cases, too many non-custodial fathers are often not sought out or included in case planning efforts. Their absence can be assumed as an expression of disinterest or detachment.

For fathers who may not have been involved in a child's life there is critical work that must be done to build relationships between the child and their father, and to support the father not only in getting to know his child, but also to support him in learning how to navigate an often complicated web of systems: child welfare, probation, child support, behavioral and mental health, etc.

Practices like family group conferencing, family connections meetings, and responsible parenting are successful tools Casey Family Programs has used to support strengthening the functioning of families to include fathers and other paternal relatives. Even when it is challenging to locate a father, there are technologies available, such as Skype and Facebook that can offer connections. In addition, involving the paternal side of the family offers a whole extended family to a child, providing opportunities for meaningful relationships, new family connections, relational permanency, and increased options for legal permanency, including guardianship.

At today's hearing we have experts with us who have talked about specific Fatherhood programs and interventions that have been shown to be effective, and I also want to highlight a few promising programs that Casey Family Programs is aware of across the country.

At the Allegheny County (Pennsylvania) Department of Human Services Office of Children, Youth and Families, father engagement specialists are able to work with fathers one-on-one to help support closer relationships with their children, families, and communities. Father engagement specialists are not caseworkers, but work alongside the caseworker. They have the flexibility to meet fathers at times and locations that are convenient for them and to work on specific issues deemed important to the father. Allegheny County also offers fatherhood programming through its network of Family Support Centers and the Father Collaborative Council of Western Pennsylvania.

In 2016, the Indiana Department of Child Services (DCS) issued a request for proposal to build its network of providers to implement fatherhood programming that offers assistance and support to fathers whose children are involved with DCS. Following provider selection, fatherhood service standards were implemented to support the providers in working with DCS to successfully engage fathers in services to improve their child's safety, stability, well-being, permanency, and to assist fathers in strengthening their relationships with their children. These standards included an understanding of male learning styles and help-seeking behaviors for effective engagement. The standards also included the provision of supportive services in the home or community environment, and promotion of community awareness regarding the value of engaging fathers.

Casey Family Programs has also worked with the Paternal Opportunities, Programs and Services Organization (POPS) in San Diego, CA. This organization advocates for fathers and helps manage cases, with the goal of family reunification by assisting fathers in developing parenting skills in tandem with a step-by-step reunification plan. POPS also provides fathers with moral support, counseling, case strategy, parenting education, self-growth through support groups, legal clinics, individual counseling, and group counseling.

Federal Efforts to Support Families in Need and Address the Opioid Crisis

We commend Congress for its leadership and work to pass into law the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First). There should be nothing more important to us as a nation than ensuring the safety of our children and ensuring that they have the opportunity to grow up surrounded by a Community of Hope.

This legislation makes it clear that our national child and family well-being response systems will always seek to fully address the well-being of children while also addressing the well-being of their families and their communities. We have always known that it is vitally important that we intervene as early as possible to ensure the safety of children.

Focusing on the safety of children within the context of the needs of and support to both parents is particularly critical as we combat the opioid epidemic, which has had a devastating impact on families and communities across the country. Following years of decline in the national foster care population (from approximately 463,000 in FY2008 to approximately 397,000 in FY2012), there has been a steady increase in the number of children in foster care. In FY2015, there were nearly 428,000 children in foster care in the United States, the highest number since 2008. In FY2017, there were 443,000 children in foster care in the United States.¹¹

Many jurisdictions have attributed this increase to opioid use disorders and overdoses among parents. At least 36% of the entries into foster care were identified as due to parental substance use. This percentage has steadily risen in recent years and yet it is believed that this represents an undercount, due to the varying approaches states use to document reasons for removal.¹² While parental substance abuse is not a new challenge for child welfare agencies, the current opioid epidemic is proving to have an immeasurable impact on foster care caseloads and child welfare budgets across the country.

We believe Family First provides states and tribes with an incredible opportunity to drive transformation in their child welfare systems. For decades, the federal partnership in protecting children has only provided resources for a limited number of children, and only after they had been removed from their families. Brain science and research tells us that: (1) it is important to intervene as early as possible to support families who are in crisis or facing challenges, (2) the act of removing children from their families and their homes creates emotional distress and trauma that should be avoided whenever possible, and (3) most children experience much better outcomes when they can remain safety at home while their parents receive the community services and support they need.

There is tremendous opportunity in Family First to enable states and tribes to support and strengthen their families who are in need and improve the safety of their child. Beginning as early as October 1, 2019, states and eligible tribes will have the ability to access new federal funding to provide prevention services and programs for up to 12 months for children at

¹¹ AFCARS Report #25, published November 8, 2018

¹² Ibid. *Children enter care for many reasons. These categories represent the standard removal reasons states provide as part of their required AFCARS submission. How states utilize these standard fields, and whether or not they use all fields, is impacted by two key things: 1) how the removal reasons in their case management system are mapped to these categories; and 2) how caseworkers are instructed to determine removal reasons for a child. State policy and practice vary.

imminent risk of entering foster care, any parenting or pregnant youth in foster care, parents — biological or adopted — and kin caregivers.

The new Title IV-E prevention services, as well as training and administrative costs associated with developing these services, would have no income test (“delinked” from the AFDC income eligibility requirement). Eligible services are evidence-based mental health and substance abuse prevention and treatment services and in-home parent skill-based services.

Family First also allows states, for the first time, the opportunity to use Title IV-E funding to offer evidence based parenting skills education to both mothers and fathers. Parent education programs focus on enhancing parenting practices and behaviors; such as developing and practicing positive discipline techniques; learning age-appropriate child development skills and milestones; promoting positive play and interaction between parents and children; and locating and accessing community services and supports. These programs can be incredibly helpful to first-time parents, including teen parents, noncustodial fathers, and fathers needing support and guidance in understanding and fulfilling their role.

Casey Family Programs works with many youth who have shared their excitement about access to prevention services for pregnant and parenting teens in foster care available through Title IV-E. Youth and alumni from foster care in the National Foster Care and Alumni Policy Council have prioritized expecting and parenting youth in foster care as a critical population to focus on to prevent abuse and neglect.

They recommend changing language from “pregnant” to “expecting” teens in foster care to be more inclusive of fathers and to encourage the engagement of fathers and mothers across the continuum of child development. This continuum includes targeted in-home skill-based parenting services during the prenatal period, post-natal period, and ongoing during their time in foster care and as they transition into adulthood.

As we look ahead to the implementation of Family First, there are some evidence-based programs that are already supporting fathers within the context of their families, such as Nurse Family Partnership, which works with both mothers and fathers who are expecting a first child. Nurse Family Partnerships is currently being reviewed by the Clearinghouse created under Family First to identify promising, supported or well supported evidence-based programs that states can use to provide families with prevention services that are outcomes-based.

In 2016, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services contracted with the Child and Family Research Partnership to conduct the Father Participation and Retention Evaluation which examined home visiting programs in Texas. The findings revealed that families where fathers participated in at least one home visit were enrolled in the home visiting program for an average of 17.2 months. This was nearly 7 months longer than the average 10.6 months of enrollment for families where fathers did not participate in any home visits.

While promising fatherhood engagement programs currently exist -- and we have heard about additional approaches today -- states and communities must continue to promote, expand, and develop these types of programs that initiate and strengthen the connection between fathers and their children. Using the tools provided by Congress, like Family First, we believe that these programs will have a significant impact on improving life outcomes for children and their families.

The Family First Prevention Services Act – Opportunities and Challenges

What we know from these and other programs is that the needs of fathers are significant and varied. For many fathers, these needs often include substance use disorders and mental health needs. Along with in-home parenting supports, these are the specific categories of prevention services highlighted in and supported by Family First. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has clarified that these services are not required to be provided in the home, but rather the included services are intended to support children who remain at home with their parent(s).

However, the service needs and engagement with fathers is often unique, especially for fathers who do not live with their children. To take full advantage of the supportive programs in Family First, especially for fathers who do not reside with their children, more work is needed because many programs, including licensed residential family-based treatment facilities, that address these needs are designed for mothers, not fathers. What is clear is that a wide array of programs should be considered to ensure that the unique needs of all parents, including fathers, are met.

Since Family First was passed at the beginning of 2018, Casey Family Programs has been hosting learning opportunities for state agency leaders, provider and community agencies, legislators and judicial partners, tribal leaders, and many others, to ensure that the opportunity to access prevention programs and the need to ensure appropriate placements and appropriate services for children are realized by states and tribes as soon as possible.

In May 2019, Casey convened 17 states who are planning to Implement Family First in 2019. There is great enthusiasm and energy around the ability to provide and increase the availability of services that truly meet child and family needs before placement in foster care becomes necessary. The topics that were the focus of this meeting included creating Prevention Plans, defining Candidacy, creating and supporting Evidence-Based Programs (EBPs), creating Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTPs) and addressing financial issues. State, Tribal, and county jurisdictions are looking to Casey to organize and facilitate ongoing dialog and learning opportunities that allow them to learn from each other and work together to facilitate implementation.

I want to again reiterate the enthusiasm we see for Family First and the considerable interest from many states and tribes to access these new federal resources in a timely manner. States and Tribes have also voiced concerns about barriers to successful and timely implementation that they believe still exist:

- We continue to hear frustration expressed with the timeliness, communication, and dissemination of information, specifically regarding the evidence-based programs (EBP) requirement and the establishment of the Family First Clearinghouse. States rely on timely guidance on Clearinghouse programs to develop their prevention plans and have enough time to complete RFP (request for proposal) requirements to identify new evidence-based programs.
- Timely assurances and guidance on the approval of state Title IV-E prevention plans has also been identified as an important concern. We are aware that one jurisdiction has already submitted their plan for approval, and several others are near submission. For states who want to begin claiming funds on October 1, 2019 only 15 weeks remain between now and that date.

- For states to access the federal prevention funds, the law requires that they spend at least 50% of funds for these services on well-supported programs. Jurisdictions are committed to identifying and implementing the most appropriate evidence-based programs for their families. However, there has been considerable concern expressed about how to ensure in the early years that they can meet this 50% funding requirement. This may be further compounded if the number of programs identified by the Clearinghouse is not sufficiently extensive. In addition, specialized programs, like fatherhood programs, that have demonstrated results but may not yet be categorized as well-supported programs may be limited in use due to this requirement.
- States also have identified concerns about the impact of the 50% well-supported requirement in rural areas where limited service is available and in tribal communities that have unique needs.
- Family First is monumental not only in what it provides for states and tribes but also in the opportunity that it presents to truly transform child welfare systems. Transformation at this level will take time and also resources. While States and tribes move forward with serving families at home and in their communities, they also will continue the critical work and focus of providing quality, temporary foster care services. States and tribes are in varying places, facing varying challenges around workforce, training, and availability of quality service providers and continue to identify resource needs in building their capacity.
- There is a lot of excitement and interest in the provision in Family First that allows for Title IV-E reimbursement for a child who is placed with their parent in a residential family-based treatment facility. Congress has provided numerous funding streams to enhance capacity given the current opioid epidemic, but this will take time. States continue to need additional support to create these facilities, as they are currently limited in number especially in rural communities. Additionally, we encourage states and jurisdictions to coordinate with community providers to ensure these treatment facilities are options for fathers as well as mothers, not only to ensure this needed treatment resource is available to all who need it, but also to promote all family bonds that are critical in child development.
- High quality child welfare data systems that track and coordinate services for parents and children are essential for states and tribes to serve families effectively. It remains a challenge for states and tribes to identify the necessary resources to develop, expand, and truly integrate their data systems as well as develop capacity to use data to ensure families and children are achieving better outcomes.

Casey Family Programs is committed to working with states, tribes, the Administration, Congress, and all stakeholders to ensure Family First reaches its potential to serve as a critical tool in our efforts to ensure children are safe, families are supported and all communities have the capacity to help them thrive.

We commend the Committee for bringing attention to the critical importance of engaging fathers in the lives of children, especially children involved in the child welfare system. The benefits for child development, educational success, strong healthy families, and supportive communities

are clear. It is also equally clear that fatherhood engagement in and of itself is a powerful prevention strategy.

We are encouraged that there are successful and emerging fatherhood programs that are making a difference, but more needs to be done. The opportunities in Family First support prevention services that parents and youth alike – mothers as well as fathers – have found of tremendous value for promoting recovery, stabilizing their family before maltreatment occurs, and strengthening their family.^{13 14}

Our goal is for states and tribes to be fully supported in realizing these opportunities, building capacity, and providing needed services to children and families so that placement in foster care is truly the last option, not the first and most frequently utilized response.

Thank you for the opportunity to join you today. I'm happy to answer any questions.

¹³ Testimony of Sandra Killelt. August 4, 2015. U.S. Senate Committee on Finance Hearing “A Way Back Home: Preserving Families and Reducing the Need for Foster Care”.

<https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/04aug2015-KilleltTestimony.pdf>

¹⁴ What Parents Say About Prevention and Early Intervention. National Alliance for Children’s Trust and Prevention Funds, 2017.

http://www.bpnn.ctfalliance.org/BPNN%20Brief_Prevention%20Strategies%20That%20Work.pdf