

**Testimony before the Congressional Subcommittee on Human Resources of the
Committee on Ways and Means
February 27, 2013**

**Kelly Rosati, J.D.
Vice President, Community Outreach
Focus on the Family
8605 Explorer Dr., Colorado Springs, CO 80920**

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for inviting my testimony before you this afternoon. Please allow me to introduce myself and my organization. My name is Kelly Rosati, and I am the Vice President of Community Outreach at Focus on the Family. I am also blessed, along with my husband, to have adopted our four children from the foster care system, and three of them have special needs. One of my roles at Focus on the Family is to oversee our Adoption and Orphan Care Initiative.

Focus on the Family is a donor-supported global Christian ministry that reaches about 238 million people in 130 countries. We help families thrive by providing help and resources for strengthening believers in their faith and sharing the gospel; building resilient marriages that reflect God's design; equipping parents to raise their children with a thriving faith; advocating for the preborn, orphaned and life at every stage; and engaging the culture through a biblical worldview. Visit Focus online at FocusOnTheFamily.com.

I: The Current State of the US Foster Care System

One of our nation's most intractable child-advocacy issues is the tragedy of children and youth trapped in foster care awaiting adoptive families to call their own. The children in this situation are often viewed by society as "un-adoptable" because of their age, minority status, or special need. At Focus on the Family, we reject such thinking and believe that every waiting child deserves a family. We are committed to using our voice and reach within the Christian community to recruit adoptive families for these waiting children.

We have also discovered through our national collaborative efforts with other adoption-focused organizations, including Show Hope (Christian musician Steven Curtis Chapman's organization), Hope for Orphans (a ministry of FamilyLife), and the Christian Alliance for Orphans, that despite the fact that more than 100,000 children in the United States are waiting in foster care for adoptive families¹, very few faith-based organizations and leaders of the community have focused their primary attention on recruiting adoptive families for these waiting children and youth (also considered "legal orphans" as their birth parents' rights have been terminated).

Focus on the Family's desire is to fill this significant awareness gap by calling attention to the plight of the most difficult to place and longest waiting legal orphans in the United States. Some of the reasons that these children are at increased risk are:

- Most of these children started life with abuse, neglect, or abandonment.
- Their birth parents' legal parental rights had to be terminated in order to keep them safe and provide them a chance at a happy life.

¹ AFCARS Report #19, July 2012, page 1. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport19.pdf>

- Their only legal, permanent “parent” is the government entity (state or county) that has permanent legal custody of them.

These children live in temporary foster homes, move frequently from home to home, and have no permanency in their lives. Unless they are adopted, they will exit or “age-out” of the system at age 18 and may become adults who belong nowhere and have no permanent personal relationship connection with anyone.

In 2011, the most current year for which data is available, family courts across the country terminated more than 61,361 children’s birth parents’ legal parental rights, while only 50,516 children were adopted from the foster care system.² In fiscal year 2011, more than 26,000 children exited³ the foster care system, many of whom face a bleak future. Of the youth who aged-out of the foster care system without permanent connections, statistics show that:

- Almost 20 percent of foster care alumni who aged out did not have a high school diploma or GED.⁴
- Only 8 percent had a postsecondary degree from either a 2- or 4-year school.⁵
- 81 percent of male former foster youth and 59 percent of female former foster youth were arrested by age 23 or 24.⁶
- Nearly one third of girls formerly in care had been pregnant by age 18⁷
- 68 percent of girls and 42 percent of boys had been food stamp recipients.⁸
- Over half of youth who aged out of foster care experienced one or more episodes of homelessness.⁹

Without the stability and comfort of a permanent family, many youth suffer dire consequences.

II: The Emphasis of our Involvement with Child Welfare

At Focus on the Family, we believe that every child deserves a permanent family. For too long, children and youth in foster care have been overlooked and forgotten. Right now, more than 100,000 legal orphans in the U.S. foster care system are waiting for adoptive families to call their own. As we looked at the need, we found that it was not because of a lack of agency capacity or competency that these children and youth are waiting. Rather, a lack of adoptive families causes them to wait. Therefore, our primary objective is to raise awareness of and recruit families for waiting kids in foster care.

The combination of our deeply held convictions coupled with the fact that there are more than 300,000 churches in the United States leads us to believe that by mobilizing the thousands of faith communities

² AFCARS Report #19, July 2012, page 1. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport19.pdf>

³ AFCARS Report #19, July 2012, page 3. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport19.pdf>

⁴ Mark Courtney, Amy Dworsky, Gretchen Cusick, Judy Havlicek, Alfred Perez, Tom Keller, “Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21.” *Chapin Hall Center for Children*, University of Chicago, (December 2007): 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

⁹ Peter Pecora, Ronald Kessler, Jason Williams, Kirk O’Brien, Chris Downs, Diana English, James White, Eva Hiripi, Catherine White, Tamera Wiggins, & Kate Holmes, “Improving Foster Family Care: Findings from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study.” *Casey Family Programs*, (2005).

around the country, we will see a reduction in the number of waiting children throughout our foster care system. In some communities, this has already proven true.

In order to accomplish this, we launched *Wait No More: Finding Families for Waiting Kids* events. We collaborate with government officials (state and county), adoption agencies, church leaders and ministry partners to host half-day events. Through the event and robust, targeted media campaigns, *Wait No More* is highlighting the urgent need for adoptive parents.

At the *Wait No More* event, attendees have the opportunity to hear different perspectives on adoption from foster care from adoptive parents, adopted youth, siblings, and social workers. We do not sugarcoat the difficulties inherent in the process. To the contrary, we spend time explaining the common behavioral challenges, the reasons behind such challenges, and strategies for successful child and family outcomes.

In addition, on the day of the event, adoption agencies and support ministries are on site to answer questions and help families take the next step in the process. Most importantly, families have the opportunity to start the process of adoption from foster care before they leave the event. Families are able to choose an agency they prefer to work with, and those who do not choose an agency on that day are matched with agencies based on criteria such as agency service area and capacity. We coordinate with the agencies after the event regarding those families, and they typically receive a call from the agency within 3 business days of the event.

III: Program Outcomes

To date, through 15 events and three online campaigns, more than 2,100 families have started the process of adoption from foster care through the collaborative efforts of *Wait No More*. Additional events are planned around the country in the hopes that children and youth in foster care will *Wait No More* for the forever families they deserve.

Here in Colorado, we have invested heavily in recruitment efforts in order to see the number of waiting kids reduced. In 2008 when we hosted our first event, more than 800 children and youth were awaiting permanent families. As a result of both the *Wait No More* efforts and the ongoing work of excellent agencies and ministries throughout the state, that number is down to about 270 waiting kids. (To read an article on the reduction in the number of waiting kids in Colorado, please see Appendix A.)

Any group working independently cannot achieve results such as these. However, through greater collaboration between child welfare, licensed child placing agencies, and churches, the results are multiplied. Through 15 events to date in twelve different states, more than 8,300 people have attended an event representing 4,500 families and 2,100 churches. As stated previously, more than 2,100 families have started the process of adoption from foster care, which is slightly more than 40 percent of families in attendance.

In May of 2011, the Gillett family attended a Wait No More event in Michigan. Here is their story:

We have now adopted twin boys. The adoption was finalized on June 20, 2012, just five days before their 16th birthdays. They had been in the system about four years and had given up hope. We have had many struggles along the way, but God in his grace sees us through the rough roads we've traveled. After 12 years of being empty nesters, we have had to make big adjustments. It's been both the hardest and the most rewarding thing

we've ever done. I wish more people would adopt a child who only wants to know someone cares! I love our boys! We are blessed!

Similarly, the Savoca family attended an event in Florida:

We considered all the different ways to adopt and chose adoption from foster care primarily because of our church adoption ministry and *Wait No More*. After attending the *Wait No More* conference in Fort Lauderdale, Florida and hearing Tiffany Jorgenson's story about being adopted at the age of 11, we felt led to consider adopting an older child and prayed about it for several months. We eventually connected with 10-year-old Carlos who liked pizza and enjoyed quoting movie lines. We continued to pray for God's guidance and wisdom, even as we encountered some difficult setbacks. The transition period was long and often difficult but we are encouraged because we see him blossoming into a wonderful young man. We are also rejoicing because Carlos recently accepted the Lord as his Savior! We are very blessed with Carlos and know the Lord is going to do mighty things in our son's life!

Stories such as these are the impetus behind the work that we do. Included in Appendix B is a brief overview of the *Wait No More* event hosted in September 2011 at Overlake Christian Church in Washington State.

IV: Crucial Factors Contributing to the Success of *Wait No More*

When considering in what locations we will host events, several criteria are used to help determine the feasibility of a successful event in a given area. Criteria include:

- Support from local county and/or state government
- Private and/or public child placing organizations with state contracts to place children and the capacity to handle additional families
- Area churches willing to serve as host as well as additional churches willing to promote the event within their congregations
- Funding secured through Focus on the Family

County and/or State Government Support

Having done events in 12 different states, we have yet to encounter a negative reaction from the state or county government. While they may have initial concerns about how the event will work, how families will be served, and how much capacity their staff and contracted partners have, we have been able to overcome those questions and work collaboratively towards a successful event. We have found state commissioners, directors, and caseworkers overall enthusiastic about additional efforts to find families for waiting kids. Our goal is simply to enhance the success of the work being done day in and day out.

Private and/or Public Child Placing Agency Capacity

While we know families will more than likely hit some roadblocks throughout the process of adoption, our hope is that this first step in starting the process will not be the first roadblock. With an average of 122 families starting the process at each event, it is important to ensure that public and private agencies combine to have enough capacity to handle the influx of families. This has, at times, prevented us from moving forward in certain locations. Recruiting adoptive families for waiting kids in foster care is a difficult endeavor. We want to do all we can to make the process as smooth as it should be. On the other hand, we discuss the importance of the process – with all its frustrations – in preparing families for the monumental task of welcoming home a waiting child or youth.

Church Involvement

The selection of the right host church can be complex. It is important to have a venue large enough to handle the event, positive name recognition, easy access for attendees unfamiliar with the area, and support from senior church leadership. It is also crucial to engage other local pastors and lay leaders in promotion of the event.

Marketing

The bulk of our costs are spent marketing the event, primarily to our Focus on the Family constituency. In order to best leverage Focus on the Family's influence, we focus our efforts through faith-based media channels including traditional radio, print and social media. We also distribute church-based promotional materials including video, bulletin inserts, flyers, and posters. We host a lunch six to eight weeks before the Wait No More event with pastors and faith-based leaders in order to cast the vision for the event, provide materials, and secure promotion commitments.

Event Funding

One of the first questions of concern to child welfare officials, private agencies, and other ministries is the cost to implement an event like this. Each *Wait No More* event is completely underwritten by the generosity of Focus on the Family donors. No agency or ministry is charged to participate nor is any family charged to attend. However, we do realize there are some costs associated with licensing families or pursuing adoption that are the responsibility of each party.

Once a determination can be made on the strength of the above criteria, we move forward with collaborative planning and marketing of the event.

V: Outside Endorsements for *Wait No More*

Since the inception of *Wait No More*, many have commented on the effectiveness of the program. Below are a few things of note:

- Recognition at the White House observance of National Adoption Month in Washington, D.C. on November 28, 2011
- The Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) briefing in May 2010 highlighted successful models of foster and adoptive parent recruitment for federal legislators and staff
- Recognition by the National Council for Adoption in "Engaging the Private Sector to Increase Positive Permanency Outcomes for Children in Foster Care" in September 2011
- Participation in a private gathering with leading adoption advocate US Senator Mary Landrieu in December 2011
- Invitation to the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives Community forum in Denver in July 2011
- From the Denver Post: "It was phenomenal. It's never happened before that we had faith-based groups, county governments, the state and other agencies in one place at one time," [Dr. Sharen] Ford said. "People Care about Colorado's kids."¹⁰
- From the Wall Street Journal: "Yet it is the efforts of Focus on the Family...that have produced the most striking results so far. The group announced...that it would be devoting a considerable amount of its resources to a new initiative called Wait No More."¹¹

¹⁰ "Adoption effort gets 'phenomenal' results," The Denver Post, November 2008.
http://www.denverpost.com/breakingnews/ci_11075305

- The Heritage Foundation: “Wait No More has delivered unprecedented rates of success in finding families for waiting children...States should enthusiastically pursue opportunities for parent recruitment through faith-based communities.”¹²

Thank you for your time today and for considering reauthorizing the Adoption Incentives Program. Please let us know if we can be of further assistance.

Kelly Rosati
Vice President, Community Outreach
Focus on the Family

¹¹ “Adoption season for evangelicals,” The Wall Street Journal, September 2010.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703743504575494263102089970.html>

¹² “Foster Care: Safety Net or Trap Door?” The Heritage Foundation, Thomas C. Atwood, pg. 14, March 2011.

Appendix A

Adoption initiative halves numbers of kids needing families

By **Electa Draper**

The Denver Post

http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_14516591

POSTED: 03/05/2010 01:00:00 AM MST

The number of Colorado children in foster care awaiting permanent adoption has been cut in half by a partnership between churches and government that places parentless kids in "forever homes."

When the Colorado Springs-based ministry Focus on the Family began spearheading the "Wait No More" adoption initiative in November 2008, the state had 8,000 children in foster care. That number included almost 800 children who were eligible for adoption because their parents had lost parental rights after the state found serious and repetitive neglect and abuse in their families.

In early 2010, only 365 children eligible for adoption remain in foster care, said Sharen Ford, manager of permanency services for the Colorado Department of Human Services.

The success of the initiative has surprised even its many partners — the state, nine counties, New Life Church in Colorado Springs, and dozens of other churches and private agencies. Ford called the results "phenomenal."

Last year alone, more than 1,000 adoptions became final, Ford said. Because children constantly enter and leave the system, the numbers are always in flux, but by the end of 2009, 6,287 were in foster care.

"I'm stunned by the number of kids we've moved off the waiting list," Focus on the Family president and chief executive Jim Daly said. "I

was one of those kids — a kid that doesn't have a mom and dad. I was never adopted, but I was very appreciative of the people who came along to mentor me."

Daly said orphan care is a core mission of Christianity.

"If my Bible math is right, God reminds us 47 times to take care of widows and orphans," Daly said. "This country has something like 300,000 churches and 130,000 orphans. The math is pretty simple."

The average age of a waiting child in Colorado is 11 to 12.

"We talk kids"

Daly said Ford and the state Human Services staff impressed him. "They care so much about the kids."

For her part, Ford said she considers it a remarkable public-private relationship.

"We don't talk religion. We don't talk politics," she said. "We talk kids."

Tiffany Beal, now a 20-year-old college senior in Colorado Springs, was in foster care for about three years before her adoption at age 11. She urges people to go out on a limb and adopt — because it's the best thing they can do for a child.

"The most amazing part of being adopted was that no matter what, I always had a home. I had someone to call Mom and Dad," Beal said. "Even at 3, my little brother knew he wasn't home in foster care. He kept asking me, 'When are we going to go home?'"

Prospective parents can hear about the challenges and rewards of adoption and then — if they choose — begin the long adoption process at "Wait No More" events.

Focus held such an event in Colorado Springs in November 2008. At one in October in Loveland, 50 families took the first steps to adopt children. The next is scheduled for September in Denver, where there are currently 116 children available for adoption.

Other participating counties are Adams, Arapahoe, Broomfield, Boulder, Larimer, El Paso, Jefferson and Pueblo.

Ford said the screening for adoptive families is extensive. Social workers attempt to match the needs of children — many of whom have experienced a great deal in their short lives — to families' capabilities. But the process is also inclusive, she says.

Colorado law allows for adoptive families to be two-parent, single-parent, older or otherwise nontraditional, including gay households.

"We try to screen people in," Ford said. "Everybody wants to have a forever home. And there are no such things as perfect families. We need families who are flexible — who have humor."

Room for four more

Bill, whose last name is being withheld to ensure his family's safety, last year adopted four siblings between the ages of 3 and 10. He and his wife already had four children.

His biggest anxiety was the sheer number of unknowns, from the kids' favorite foods to potential emotional triggers from past traumas.

"The most amazing thing is that they've been in our home less than a year, but it feels like it's been a lot longer — in a good way," Bill said, laughing. "From that first weekend, it felt as if it was meant to be. But that first weekend, there was a lot of explaining."

At Focus, the initiative is a national effort, said Kelly Rosati, senior director of the ministry's Sanctity of Life division.

In addition to the two adoption events in Colorado, Focus has held such meet-ups in St. Louis, Los Angeles and Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Of those attending, 830 families initiated the adoption process at the events. About 750 different churches have been involved.

"We are not giving up or stopping until every waiting child in Colorado has the family it deserves," Rosati said.

*Electa Draper: 303-954-1276
or edraper@denverpost.com.*

Find out more

Don't want to wait until the next adoption event? Visit icareaboutorphans.org to learn about adopting kids from foster care.

Appendix B

Wait No More^(R): Finding Families for Waiting Kids

Finding Families for Washington's Waiting Kids Results Overview



- Hosted *Wait No More* at Overlake Christian Church on Saturday, September 24, 2011
- Approximately 630 people attended
- Those people represented more than 345 different families
- **Of those, 111 families initiated the process of adoption from foster care at the event;** this represents 32.0% of families in attendance
- 15 agencies and ministries were on site to answer participants' questions and help them start the process of adoption from foster care including:
 - A Family for Every Child Heart Gallery
 - Antioch Adoptions
 - Bethany Christian Services
 - City Ministries
 - Department of Social and Health Services of Washington
 - Olive Crest
 - Overlake Christian Church
 - Youth for Christ
- More than 160 different churches were represented at *Wait No More*
- All participating families received complimentary copies of Focus on the Family resources: *Handbook on Thriving as an Adoptive Family*, *Wait No More: One Family's Amazing Adoption Journey*, and "Wrapping Around Adoptive Families"