

Testimony of
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U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means,
Subcommittee on Human Resources
"Letting Kids Be Kids: Balancing Safety with Opportunity for Foster Youth"

May 9, 2013

Good morning, Chairman Reichert, Ranking Member Doggett and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting us to speak to your committee regarding Normalcy in the lives of children in foster care.

My name is David Wilkins, and I am the Secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF). Accompanying me today is my wife, Tanya Wilkins, who is our Chief Advocate for Foster Care and Adoption¹.

¹ Gov. Rick Scott named David Wilkins as Secretary of the Florida Department of Children and Families in January 2011. Gov. Scott named Tanya Wilkins, RN, BSN, the Statewide Advocate for Foster Care and Adoption, within the Governor's Office of Adoption and Child Protection, in July 2012.

Tanya is a registered nurse. I worked for Accenture, a global management consulting and technology company, for almost 30 years. We do not have a lot of experience in government, but our private sector experiences, our experience as parents to three daughters, and our volunteer experience in sponsoring foster youth in our home for years have provided us a unique perspective on how to serve the children and families of Florida.

We are here today to talk about balancing safety and normalcy in the lives of children in foster care. When we first arrived at DCF, we were confronted with a number of alarming statistics that highlighted the failure of children in child welfare.

- 50% of children in foster care are below grade level
- More than 50% of our foster children do not participate in extracurricular activities
- Over half of our young adults fail in our Independent Living program when you consider arrests, teen pregnancies and academic achievement.²

² Based on an annual survey in Spring 2012 of young adults (18- to 23-years-old) in Florida's Independent Living Program, 45% of the young women had given birth to a child; 47% were receiving public food assistance; 60% received a high school diploma or GED; 40% had been arrested at least once.

These statistics pointed out that the success of children in foster care is not adequate. Upon further analysis, a large reason for these inadequacies is the related failure in our foster parenting system. Our foster parent population has dropped 15% over the last three years. Not surprising, of children in licensed care, the percent of children in group care has increased over the same timeframe.

Upon surveying many of these parents, we were told that the frustrations are high. Foster parents are burdened with paperwork, court responsibilities and a list of job responsibilities all centered on “protecting the child.” The result is obvious. We were not letting “Kids be Kids,” and we were not giving parents the “Permission to Parent.”

A culture change was and is still needed to permeate the entire system with the information that “normalcy” in foster care is paramount. Parents of our children’s friends *do not* need to be background-screened for a sleepover; young people *should* be able to go to church activities without a licensed foster parent; and children *should* be included in social and extracurricular activities.

Having seen the need for change to make children in foster care successful, we developed three key initiatives that drove policy and program changes.

1) Performance Management of our Community-Based Care Providers

Measuring performance is central to promoting accountability. We developed a performance scorecard that measures DCF's contracted foster care agencies on 11 measures to determine how well they are meeting the most critical needs of at-risk children and their families.³ Since the first Scorecard was produced a year ago, performance has improved nearly 25%. Accountability, transparency and competition all drive dramatic performance improvements.

2) Normalcy – This initiative was about driving operational and culture change into the organization.

- We rewrote many of our administrative rules on licensing and foster care to provide improved parental flexibility.

³ A copy of the monthly Community-Based Care Scorecard is in your packet and available online:
<http://www.myflfamilies.com/about-us/planning-performance-measures/cbc-scorecard>

- We issued open letters and memos to the foster parents and staff, stating emphatically that this administration was in complete support of normalizing their activities.
- We developed a media campaign “Don’t Say ‘No’ Until You Know.”⁴
- We also issued a Social Networking Policy that clarified DCF’s policy regarding the use of the Internet and online social networking sites.⁵ I have learned that virtually all children have to have FaceBook!
- Lastly, we issued a Youth Bill of Rights titled, *Childhood Only Happens Once*. It was developed with advice from current and former foster youth, and distributed statewide.⁶

The passage of the Quality Parenting For Children in Foster Care Act by Florida’s legislature codifies in law, “Permission to Parent.” Sen. Detert sponsored this great bill, and she will discuss this in more detail in her testimony.

⁴ See posters and materials developed as part of the “Don’t Say ‘No’ Until You Know” media campaign in your packet and online: <http://centerforchildwelfare2.fmhi.usf.edu/qpi1/docs/DontsaynoFINAL.pdf>

⁵ See memorandum from Drew Parker, DCF General Counsel, and Melanie M. Burnette, Assistant General Counsel, dated February 22, 2012:

<http://centerforchildwelfare2.fmhi.usf.edu/kb/policymemos/OnlineSocialNetworkingPolicyLegalOpinion.pdf>

⁶ See the Youth Bill of Rights: http://www.fosteringflorida.com/docs/Bill_of_Rights_draft_5-4-12jf.pdf

The third key initiative is **Fostering Florida's Future**. Tanya will address this initiative.

(Begin testimony by Tanya Wilkins, Statewide Advocate for Foster Care and Adoption):

Good morning, Chairman Reichert, Ranking Member Doggett and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for allowing me to speak to your committee about the Fostering Florida's Future initiative.

Recognizing that Florida needs additional quality foster families who can provide safe and loving homes to children in need, we launched the Fostering Florida's Future Initiative in June 2012. This is a collaboration with our 20 community-based care agencies throughout the state, the Guardian ad Litem program, the Florida State Foster/Adoptive Parent Association, the Quality Parenting Initiative, local associations and many others.

When the Governor appointed me as the Statewide Advocate, I had no idea how much it would touch our lives. We have been a sponsor family for a residential group home in Tallahassee, where we served several teenage girls in our home. It was heart-wrenching to listen to the girls tell us of the

abuse and neglect they had endured, yet a blessing to feel that we could help empower them to overcome their tough situations.

We parented them as if they were our own – much like the hundreds of foster parents that I have been fortunate to meet. Based on these learnings, we landed on an action plan for our Fostering Florida's Future initiative.

- We developed an awareness campaign with a Web site, videos and social media.
- We created a recruitment campaign to find 1,200 new foster families for our children, and we are on track to reach this goal by June!
- We are improving training for foster parents through the Quality Parenting Initiative, using trauma-informed care principles, focusing on awareness of attachment disorders, and
- We have simplified the licensing process.

Fostering Florida's Future is showing great success in building enthusiasm and in getting people interested in being foster parents. But most of all, it is helping to provide loving and caring families for these vulnerable children.

(Secretary Wilkins wraps up the presentation):

Children in foster care are our responsibility. In Florida, I consider myself their dad. So, therefore, we expect to give them every opportunity that all other kids in the state of Florida have.

To close, we would like to thank Governor Rick Scott for the opportunity to serve in his administration and to serve the children and families in Florida. His leadership has been instrumental in our success. And thank you, again, Chairman Reichert, for the opportunity to share with your committee the great things Florida is doing to improve the success of the children in foster care.

Florida Department of Children and Families Online Resources

Florida Department of Children and Families' website

<http://www.myflfamilies.com/>

Community-Based Care Scorecard used to measure performance

<http://www.myflfamilies.com/about-us/planning-performance-measures/cbc-scorecard>

Normalcy legislation by Senator Detert and Representative Albritton – “Let Kids Be Kids”

http://myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Documents/loaddoc.aspx?FileName=_h0215er.docx&DocumentType=Bill&BillNumber=0215&Session=2013

Fostering Florida's Future website

<http://www.fosteringflorida.com/>

Childhood Only Happens Once poster for the “Don't Say ‘No’ Before You Know”

Campaign http://www.fosteringflorida.com/docs/DCF_PosterFinals%202_Proof.pdf

“Don't Say ‘No’ Before You Know” campaign

<http://centerforchildwelfare2.fmhi.usf.edu/qpi1/docs/DontsaynoFINAL.pdf>

Open Letter on Normalcy to Foster Parents and Residential Group Care Providers

http://centerforchildwelfare2.fmhi.usf.edu/kb/PlcyMmo/SecLetter_normalcy_2_29_12.pdf

Online Social Networking Policy for Children and Youth in Foster Care

<http://centerforchildwelfare2.fmhi.usf.edu/kb/policymemos/OnlineSocialNetworkingPolicyLegalOpinion.pdf>

Memo: Normalcy, Babysitting, Vacation, and Emergency Care for Children in Out-Of-Home Care

<http://floridafapa.org/files/Normalcy%20Babysitting%20Memo%203-5-13.pdf>

Childhood Only Happens Once: Opportunities for Children and Youth Living in Foster Care – The Bill of Rights For Children In Foster Care

http://www.fosteringflorida.com/docs/Bill_of_Rights_draft_5-4-12jf.pdf

Fostering Florida's Future Talking Points

<http://www.fosteringflorida.com/docs/materials/fosterbusiness.pdf>

Fostering Florida's Future 2012 Report - Accomplishments of the initiative to recruit and support foster parents and promote success of children in foster care

<http://www.fosteringflorida.com/docs/FosteringFloridasFuture-2012report.pdf>

