



Committee On Finance

Max Baucus, Ranking Member

NEWS RELEASE

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**Opening Statement of U.S. Senator Max Baucus (D-Mont.)
Fostering Permanence: Progress Achieved and Challenges Ahead
for America's Child Welfare System
Hearing Before the Senate Finance Committee**

The Psalmist called on God "to defend the fatherless and the oppressed." Today, that job often falls to the child welfare system.

That system protects the most vulnerable. It provides a safe harbor for children. It looks out for children whose birth families, for one reason or another, have not been able to provide fertile soil, in which to grow.

Each year, almost 3,000 Montana children enter foster care. They come because of abuse. They come because of neglect. They come because of other serious difficulties in their families.

Unfortunately, the number of foster families available to provide safe, caring homes for these children has not kept up with the need. The shortfall is especially acute for minority children, older youth, and sibling groups.

The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services places foster children from infants to 18 years old. Often sibling groups need to be placed. And it is almost always better if they can be placed together. Many of the children have physical, emotional, or learning challenges. All the children need placements in safe, stable homes.

The children reflect Montana's cultural diversity and special needs. And we have heard testimony that "over 65 percent of all foster care placements in Montana are directly attributable to drug use and of those, meth is a primary factor 57 percent of the time. . . . And meth use among residents of the seven Indian tribes in Montana is far in excess of epidemic proportion."

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I am proud to be a cosponsor of legislation introduced by Senator Bingaman that will make Combat Meth funds under the Patriot Act available to tribes.

Today, we will hear from Arlene Templer, of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe of Montana. I will be interested to hear from her the success and challenges faced by our Indian Child Welfare system.

One usually thinks of a child's placement in foster care as temporary. But some children may never be able to return safely to their families. In those cases, every effort should be made to find the most permanent living arrangement possible, such as guardianship or adoption. Among the children who are adopted nationwide through the foster care program, 62 percent are adopted by their foster family.

The "Promoting Safe and Stable Families" program supports efforts to rebuild families. And it helps to find permanency for kids when that proves impossible. This program is the largest dedicated source of federal funds for services to children and families. Last year, Montana received a little over one million dollars from the program. These funds are critical to Montana's child welfare system.

While children are in the child welfare system, their needs are great. But we must also remember the approximately 20,000 children in our country that age out of the system without finding a permanent home. I applaud the resiliency of the children who manage to make this difficult transition and go on to lead functional and fulfilled lives. I also commend the thousands of case workers, foster families, neighbors, and friends across the country who work to provide safety, stability, and love for the more than half a million children in the nation's foster care system.

Critical child welfare services have recently experienced cuts in funding. This year, the "Promoting Safe and Stable Families" program is up for reauthorization. This is a pivotal opportunity to ensure adequate support for strong families.

I look forward to hearing the perspectives of today's witnesses on how we defend the fatherless and the oppressed. I look forward to hearing how we can better protect our nation's most precious resource. I look forward to hearing how we can better safeguard the wellbeing of our children.

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