

JOINT
SENATE HEALTH & WELFARE COMMITTEE
AND
HOUSE HEALTH & WELFARE COMMITTEE
Friday, February 12, 2016

ATTACHMENT 9

Foster Care Reform Hearing

In November 2013, health and welfare called our adoption agency looking for an adoptive family for a group of siblings. The children had been in the system for 18 months and parental rights were expected to be terminated within a few months and we would be officially selected as the adoptive family at that time. Unfortunately, it took 9 months until parental rights were finally terminated and then we were informed that a relative had come forward to adopt them. Even though the case workers felt it was not an appropriate placement, they needed to allow time for them to complete a home study and there was no deadline for this to happen. At the same time, the department decided to try and reunite the children with other siblings who they had separated and placed into another pre-adopt home because of the immense needs of all of these children. They believed chances were slim that they would find a capable family but felt the need to pursue it anyway. In February 2015, after almost a year and a half of bonding with these children, working with multiple therapists and counselors to help them attach to us, and treating them as our own children, the department decided to move them to another pre-adopt home also separate from their siblings.

We were told not to say anything to the children until they found a new family but then one day, the case worker pulled our foster child out of class by herself, with no other support people around, to tell her the traumatizing news that she was going to be moving to a new family. They then sent her back to class with a hand written note of what the transition schedule would be. (That is how fast the decision was made that the case worker did not even have time to type up a letter.) There is much more to our story but the summary of it is that they picked up the children from their school the next day and moved them to the new family without informing us beforehand. They told us to pack their stuff up and bring it to the department. We also escalated the issue to the top of the department and met with several managers. They repeatedly told us there were no safety concerns in our home. They admitted to us that it was not handled appropriately and that changes had been made to their processes based on our case but that nothing could be done about our children at that point. We were allowed to see the children to say goodbye but have not been able to maintain contact with them. We don't know what they told the children and can only imagine that they feel abandoned by us and unloved which is the furthest thing from the truth. We will always love these children and consider them a part of our family.

Since then, we have given up our dream of adopting and our only daughter will never have a sibling because of this situation. The only siblings she has ever known were ripped from her life. The emotional trauma this has caused our family has been immense but the trauma on the children is so much worse. The children were not given an opportunity to say goodbye to any of their friends and professional services they received while in our home were abruptly ended.

Changes need to be made immediately. The court system needs to have oversight. The judge in our case recommended that the department leave the children in our home and not pursue the other relative placement but they did it anyway. The judge told us she did not have jurisdiction to decide placement decisions. I believe that most of the case workers are good people who get into this job to help children but they are dealing with high stress, huge case loads and difficult situations. I am a trained counselor and have helped many adults and children suffering from the effects of trauma. In my professional opinion, many of the case workers are suffering from secondary trauma which they pass on to the foster parents and

children on their case load. When soldiers come back from war, they are evaluated by medical and mental health professionals to help them debrief and see if they are able to go back to the front lines. The same thing cannot be said about our foster care social workers. They need to be overseen by psychologists and evaluated on a regular basis for burnout and counter transference.

In addition to the changes already recommended, there needs to be a protocol for informing children of traumatizing information. ^{The debt} They need to be held accountable for following their own recommendations for transitions and there needs to be more urgency in permanence. It took 3 ½ years for these children to finally find permanency. If changes are not made, it will be a disservice to all those involved in the foster care system, but especially the children.

Jodi Fulford - pg. 2