

Senate Bill 1341: The Foster Care Improvement Act

- **Introduction:**

- My name is Dr. Robert Ball and I'm Vice President of Programs with the Idaho Youth Ranch. I've worked in Idaho with at-risk children & families for the past 29 years. I'm here in support of Senate Bill 1341.
- For 65 years the Idaho Youth Ranch has been helping the exact same kinds of kids represented in this bill. Our entire goal is to help vulnerable kids- those who have been abused, neglected, abandoned- to have a promising future. By doing so we're strengthening Idaho.
- Take Ivy, for example- a Hays House graduate. Ivy grew up with a physically abusive mom and when Ivy was about 8 years old, her mom would be gone for weeks at a time. Ivy would just come home & she'd be gone. She ended up taking care of her self while growing up. As Ivy puts it "I was living in survival mode for many years." She was eventually put in foster care when 12- was in several homes and then went to live with her dad who was an alcoholic. It didn't last long and she left. She became homeless for a while and then found out about Hays House. She ended up graduating from Hays House & graduating from high school with honors. She is now in her 2nd year at BSU pursuing her dream to be a lawyer. We know firsthand that kids with very difficult experiences can move beyond their circumstances with the right supports. Who they are does not have to be defined by what happened to them.

- **Thank you:**

- So, I want to thank the sponsors of this bill, the interim Foster Care Study Committee and you as members of the Senate Judiciary & Rules Committee for this hearing.
- These are sensitive issues to talk about- some of you in this room may have had similar experiences to kids in foster care. For example, current stats tell us 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 20 boys are victims of child sexual abuse. I commend you for tackling these issues and not giving up on these children who are so often invisible in Idaho.

- **Bill specifics:**

- Senate Bill 1341 is made up of 5 components, but I would like to comment on 2 of them: preserving sibling connections in foster care, and strengthening support services for families.
- Sibling connections:
 - I've seen first-hand the importance of keeping siblings together.

- Relationships between siblings in foster care provide a consistent source of support in a life that has been turned upside down- removed from the home they know to living with strangers. Having a brother or sister by their side can help them get through a very difficult time. Ensuring that regular contact is maintained is vital for children in foster care.
 - *The Department of Health & Welfare already works hard to keep siblings connected, but this bill send a strong message that the State of Idaho has the best interest of children in mind.*
 - Strengthen support services for families working toward reunification:
 - I was glad to see the language on page 8 that addresses the importance of strong support services for parents working to reunify with their children.
 - It can be easy to overlook just how many factors parents are trying to manage as they work towards reunification – finding housing, addressing mental health needs, building positive supports in their lives, and securing and/or maintaining a well-paying job.
 - Where we often fail, however, is not having the mindset & dedicated resources of what’s needed after the child has returned home. By providing this added level of attention & support, this bill has the potential to significantly improve foster care outcomes for our most vulnerable families.
- **First step:**
 - This bill is a great first step in addressing gaps we know exist in the foster care system
 - *Foster care will always have areas that need improvement. I and the Idaho Youth Ranch look forward to working with the legislature and the community on these important issues.*
 - Our ultimate goal as a state should be to reduce the number of children entering foster care. We can achieve this by investing in targeted, proven & measureable interventions to prevent abuse and neglect from occurring.
- **Conclusion:**
 - I & the Idaho Youth Ranch support Senate Bill 1341 and ask that you send it to the floor with a “due pass” recommendation. It is a crucial step forward in advancing positive outcomes in the foster care system that we can continue to build on for years to come.
Thank you