

Speaking Notes
for the Honourable Senator Elizabeth Hubley

**Inquiry into Canadian Children in Care, Foster
Families, and the Child Welfare System**

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Honourable senators, I rise today to call the attention of the Senate to Canadian children in care, foster families, and the child welfare system. According to Statistics Canada's census data, in 2011 there were 29 590 children aged 14 and under living in foster care.

Many thousands more were crown wards living in group homes and other institutional settings. These children are some of our most vulnerable citizens and their foster parents and social workers are some of the most hard working and dedicated individuals in our society.

And yet, too many children are not receiving the support they need and are falling through the cracks. I believe that we owe it to these children and their care providers to ensure that we are doing all we can to give them the best possible start in life.

They are our future neighbours, employees, and local business owners.

They are a part of our communities and we cannot afford to let them down.

While child welfare falls under provincial jurisdiction, the role of the federal government cannot be overlooked nor should the importance of a national perspective be underestimated.

As a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the government of Canada has human rights obligations to children in care.

The convention states that: society and the public authorities shall have the duty to extend particular care to children without a family and to those without adequate means of support. I believe we can do more to better meet those obligations.

Moreover, when we take a national look at the problems plaguing our child welfare system, it becomes clear that all provinces struggle with the same key themes and issues.

For instance, while the number of children in care continues to grow, the number of available foster families is shrinking; too many children in care do not have positive experiences and are far more likely than the average child to grow up without attaining a solid education, are more likely to be unemployed, and develop substance abuse problems; children in care find that they do not receive adequate support during their transitions to become independent young adults; and there is such an alarmingly disproportionate number of Aboriginal children in foster care that it has become a crisis.

National data on children in care is scarce. Other than the census data collected in 2011, which for the first time included questions on foster children, we know very little nationally about the overall numbers of children in care, their situations, and how long they spend in the system. Without this data it is difficult to know where we stand.

Other countries, such as the United States do a far better job of tracking national data on children in care.

There, they know exactly how many children are in care, why they are there, how long they spend, when they leave, and what happens to them when they move out of care.

Canada desperately needs more data on children in care and especially from a national perspective.

While we know very little about children in care, we know even less about foster families. Fortunately, that is beginning to change.

The Child Welfare League of Canada is nearing completion of its three year project, “Every Child Matters.” This project is a national survey that aims to improve “foster parent recruitment, retention and training practices by collecting and disseminating information, tools and best practices from around Canada.”

Foster parents are a very special group of people who are passionate about what they do. They can be single parents, working parents, same sex couples, and families with biological children.

But they all share similar difficulties when it comes to trying to navigate the social welfare system and do the best they can for the children in their care.

According to preliminary results from the “Every Child Matters” survey and focus group study, foster parents reported that they were not receiving the support, recognition, training, or financial compensation they require.

The children coming into their care have more special needs than ever before while training and support for dealing with those needs is disappearing. For foster parents, this means frustration and eventually burnout.

The shrinking pool of available foster families is forcing more children into alternative forms of care such as group homes and supervised apartments. Some children have even been housed in hotel rooms. These homes are often staffed by poorly paid and minimally trained young people who are poor substitute for parents.

They do not offer the sort of supportive and loving environment that family based care does. And while we already know that children in care are at an increased risk of poor outcomes later in life, this is especially true for children who are placed in institutional settings as opposed to with foster families.

But even for children in the care of foster families, achieving educational, social, and developmental outcomes can be a struggle. Only 44% of crown wards in Ontario graduate from high school.

This makes them more likely to wind up unemployed and at risk for future problems, such as criminal behaviour and substance abuse. Moreover, relationship problems are likely to follow them throughout their lives, putting their own children at greater risk of intervention by child welfare services.

Some foster children have described their situations as feeling like “awkward guests” in the houses of their foster families. For many children this is a result of too many moves in too short a time frame. Children may just become attached to their foster families when they are moved on to the next household.

This sort of transient lifestyle impacts them in the future as they try to maintain a sense of stability. One way of overcoming this challenge is to ensure more children are diverted out of the foster care system and toward permanent adoption.

Certainly there are many children who are not eligible for adoption, but for those who have been made permanent wards of the state, adoption is usually their best hope for a permanent home and family. Frustratingly, however, most Canadian children who are eligible for adoption do not find families willing to adopt them.

In 2010 the House of Commons standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills, and Social Development began a study into current federal support measures available to adoptive parents and their adoptive children. Their final report on this topic was tabled in March of last year and presents a good general overview of the issues involved with adoption in Canada. In fact, the committee suggests that there is a “serious adoption problem in Canada” with 30 000 children waiting to be adopted.

The reality is that of those children and youth, only around 2000 are likely to be adopted in any given year. The committee made a number of recommendations about how the federal government could do more to help ease this situation and support both parents and children through the process.

I hope the government takes these recommendations seriously and acts now to help find these children permanent homes.

While the waiting lists of eligible adoptable children continue to grow, many age out of the system before ever finding a permanent home.

The age at which a young person gains emancipation from state care varies from province to province, but ranges from age 18 to age 21. For most youth, aging out of the system is fraught with fear and uncertainty for the future.

While most 18 to 21 year olds are still supported by their families as they pursue post-secondary education, former youth in care must face these challenges alone. Without the financial, emotional, and practical support of a family, former youth in care struggle to build a solid foundation.

For many, post-secondary education is a dream they simply cannot afford, while for others, the lack of support and a family to turn to in times of difficulty is an overwhelming challenge they cannot overcome.

Honourable Senators, it is time we took a closer look at child welfare in this country and the direction in which it's headed. Over the last twenty years child welfare has changed, becoming more interventionist in approach and outcome.

This means a greater emphasis on child safety and a reduced tolerance for less than ideal family and home conditions. In other words, the definition of a child in need of protection has broadened to include not only children who are victims of abuse or serious neglect, but also those who may be at risk of future abuse or neglect.

Further, the definition of abuse has evolved to include emotional abuse as well as physical abuse. While these changes have undoubtedly had a positive impact on many children in need of protection, they have also taken a toll on families.

Studies show that when families receive the supports they need, their children are far less likely to suffer from neglect. Poverty and substance abuse within families are considerable risk factors for neglect.

But, with proper community supports and access to programs and services, families can overcome these risk factors and take good care of their children. Unfortunately, diminishing funding for these types of programs and services nationwide has left families vulnerable.

Without strong support, some parents are unable to properly care for their children and those children will be taken into care. I believe that placing intervention ahead of prevention is the wrong approach.

We must recognize that vulnerable families mean vulnerable children and instead of spending money after the fact while removing children from their homes, that money would be better spent invested in families.

This is especially true when it comes to Aboriginal families. The foster care situation in Aboriginal communities has hit a crisis point. Today, almost half of all Canadian children in care are Aboriginal – a truly shocking statistic. Most of these children are in care because of poverty and neglect.

They come from families that don't have the resources to properly provide for them. Frustratingly, once these children enter the child welfare system, they still do not receive the resources they need. Aboriginal children in care receive fewer resources than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

This situation of inequality and high numbers of Aboriginal children in care is deplorable. This situation is bound to keep repeating itself from one generation to the next unless we take action now.

Honourable Senators, 2014 is the International Year of the Family, I believe the time has come for us to focus our attention on Canadian children in care, foster families, and the child welfare system. We need more data and a new approach. These children are our responsibility and they deserve the best future we can give them.