



To: Representative Maxine Grad, Chair – Committee on Judiciary

From: Kim Coe, Lund @ kimc@lundvt.org or 864-7467

RE: Testimony regarding S.9

I would like to express my appreciation for the opportunity to provide testimony to you and your committee.

As a program director at Lund for the last twenty years and a member of the Vermont Parent Child Center Network (VPCCN), child welfare and family well being has been a focus of my life personally and professionally for my entire adulthood. I began my career as a child abuse and neglect investigator with what was then called SRS, have been a foster parent and I have adopted four children from the child welfare system. The tragic loss of life that precipitated the events leading to the drafting of S.9 was a horrific reminder of how important it is that we protect our most vulnerable citizens, the children.

What all the research has consistently shown is that the best way to protect children is to ensure that their caretakers have what they need to nurture and provide for them. I believe that the consistent theme of testimony during the public hearings, reviews and legislative hearings has been that child protection is a whole community responsibility. While there has been significant emphasis on what the DCF system needs and what crimes and statutes are necessary to achieve safety for children, there has been less emphasis on how to ensure that the services and programs that are vital for implementing the case plans are funded, effective and that we have the capacity to meet the need.

Section 2 of S.9 emphasizes the importance of using evidence informed models of serving families that prioritize child safety while developing family strengths and reducing the impact of adverse childhood experiences. Vermont Parent Child Center's are community centers throughout all of Vermont that offer an answer to this service need. The Strengthening Families framework has been embraced as an evidence informed model that is highly effective in working with all families. Compelling evidence from the three pilots for strengthening families is highlighted in the VPCCN information that is attached.

The sections of S.9, particularly section 6 that allow individuals with important information to petition for involvement in court hearings is an important step to ensure that communication is comprehensive and decision makers have the information needed to create safe plans for children and their families.

The language in section 8 that establishes the standard of "best interests of the child" as the guidance for decision making is an important step to improving child safety.

Lastly the attention paid to making revisions to S.9 specifically related to HHS removing the reference to creating a new crime for “failure to protect” and language changes to substance abuse are very important.

Animal abuse laws existed long before child abuse laws in this country and the reason for that is our strong belief in sanctity of family and the privacy and ownership that is felt about the family. However child abuse is a crime that is perpetuated by family secrets. It is essential that we not create new laws that instill fear and distrust that drive families back behind cloaks of secrecy.

Substance abuse is a chronic relapsing disease; in order to turn the curve on the alarming increasing in substance abuse in Vermont, we must create opportunities for families to recover. Further shaming and stigmatizing parents that are struggling with addiction will not move them to recovery; the research is clear on that. Adding to our already overcrowded prison, parents that need treatment will only increase the adverse childhood experiences and delay or thwart recovery and wellness.

Thank you for your attention and work on this very important legislation.

~Kim Coe