

Bill of Rights Testimony 2/19/16

S. 189 – An Act Relating to Foster Parents' Rights and Protections

My name is Lissa Schneckenburger, and I am a foster and adoptive parent from Brattleboro. I am speaking on behalf of the Vermont Foster and Adoptive Families Association, also known as VFafa. Our mission is to empower, support, and unify foster and adoptive families by strengthening the systems that care for Vermont's children, and that is why I am here today to support S. 189.

When the system is at its best, foster parents are able to be an active part of a team that includes parents, DCF, community partners, and educators. Our intent isn't to create rights at the expense of any of our partners, it is just the opposite. We believe that our children do best and reach optimal outcomes when all of the pieces of the puzzle are functioning properly and that bio parents benefit from having their children in well-informed and well supported foster families. There are times when everything comes together well, but when it doesn't, foster parents are often left without a voice.

Currently, we don't have documented rights and we are often cautious to share our concerns with DCF. When foster parents do not feel supported, children's outcomes suffer. Much of this bill solidifies what is already known to be best practice. Our hope is that this bill, if supported by the legislature, will give foster parents and potential foster parents a clear indication of what they can expect. Fostering is a temporary relationship, but a powerful one. We provide a safe, loving home to children when they are at their most vulnerable. This bill would set a standard of what a foster parent should expect in return.

Sixteen other states have already passed a Foster Parent Bill of Rights, and we can see that statistically it is a good idea. Arkansas passed a similar bill in 2007 and every year after that the number of new foster homes recruited increased, and the number of total foster homes available increased significantly (Arkansas Annual Report Card). VFafa also conducted a survey of 97 foster parents in 20 different states, who collectively have cared for over 1,000 children spanning several decades. We found that in states with an existing bill of rights, 66% of those surveyed said they were very likely to accept another placement (as opposed to 44% likelihood in states without a bill of rights). Likewise, in states with an existing bill of rights 80% of those surveyed said they were very likely to refer a friend to take a placement (as opposed to 63% likelihood in states without a bill of rights).

We are all aware of Vermont's child welfare crisis, and everyone in the system struggles to keep up with reported caseload challenges for the agency and the court, which are attributed to increased removals resulting from parental substance abuse and heightened public awareness. There is no question that it is paramount that Vermont do better at both keeping trained foster parents and recruiting new families in order to care for the increase of children in state custody. According to the VT 2015 Annual Report our state was below the national average and needed improvement in stability of foster care placement, addressing needs of foster parents, giving notice of hearings, foster parent training, and diligent recruitment of foster homes.

When we talk about foster parent's having a say in scheduling family time, it isn't to make scheduling more difficult. Yet we still hear from foster parents who say that family time is being scheduled at the worst possible times for the kids in their care. Kids are being asked to miss their own sports games (which provide stability for them and affects their relationships with teammates), their regular nap time, or their favorite subject in school in order to see their parents. We believe this time with their parents is crucial, and that it is essential to work with the foster parents to create a schedule that works for kids.

I am aware of how hard our government worked on S9 last year, and am grateful for improvements to the system that have already been made. But this bill addresses crucial elements that have been missing thus far, and establishes a standard of fair and equitable treatment for foster parents who do the vast majority of hands on care for our state's most vulnerable children. This bill also aligns well with new prudent parenting standards that were included in recent federal legislation "Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 (H.R. 4980). Every foster parent that I have ever spoken to is passionate about helping children, and fervently wants the system to work better in support of Vermont's kids. This bill will not only make a huge difference in the lives of Vermont foster parents and the children in their care, but it would improve the system as a whole.

I would like to thank you for your time, and for giving me the chance to speak in favor of S. 189.