

Good Afternoon Co-Chair Beyer and Co-Chair Nosse,



For the record my name is Elisha Big Back, for the past five years I have served as Foster Care Manager at Native American Youth and Family Services, NAYA. We serve 94 foster youth in our programs today, but my involvement stretches back a lifetime. I grew up in the NAYA community with foster families and origin families alike, and I know first hand how important cultural communities are to supporting children's success. I am here today as a longtime family advocate and liaison to the Foster Homes of Healing coalition, in support of the KEEP Foster Parent Support Program.

Last week the Child Welfare and DHS directors shared with you that Native American and Black children are more likely to be removed from their family of origin and placed into DHS Foster Care custody than other children. Those children are also less likely to be transitioned to permanent placement within two years of removal. This trend has a lasting effect on Native and Black children and families. The pattern reduces trust and makes it more and more difficult to recruit Native American and Black families to become foster parents or DHS caseworkers for that matter.

These are serious challenges, but I am optimistic about the future partnership between culturally specific community organizations, like NAYA and DHS.

KEEP is a sixteen week program of positive parenting training, peer support, and clinical services that wrap around foster families so that they feel prepared and supported to foster children with ever-growing needs. The KEEP program includes these evidence based, best practices, and also the flexibility to be delivered in a community that feels like home.

In 2018 the KEEP pilot program served over 100 families, including a Native specific cohort. One participant in that program was NAYA community member, Dawn. She regrets that she

couldn't be here in person today, but she asked me to share a little about her experience of KEEP.

Dawn enthusiastically mentioned how great it was that child care and food were provided at the weekly meetings and goes on to say,

“What I really enjoy about this group is its structure. We all get the chance to talk about our ideas and things that we think work or don't work for our families.”

“I have really enjoyed interacting with the group. Having multiple ideas and feedback has been like meeting family I didn't know I had. I am happy to learn and to share and grow with the other members.”

Dawn's full testimony has been submitted to the record if you would like to read more about her experience. I think her point about KEEP feeling like family is worth echoing. That's what these kids need more than anything - family.

Thank you for allowing me to share today. I urge you to support the Governor's Child Welfare, Foster Care Budget as recommended.

Elisha Big Back

NAYA & Foster Homes of Healing Coalition