

**Prepared Statement by Senator Chuck Grassley of Iowa
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee
“National Foster Care Month:
Supporting Youth in the Foster Care and Juvenile Justice Systems”
May 17, 2016**

When I helped found the Senate Caucus on Foster Youth, we expected our caucus to be a clearinghouse for members in the Senate to discuss policy issues that cross many committee jurisdictions. Our caucus was also created to help generate better ideas and best practices. We want people to learn from both youth and experts. And, we want these ideas to be put into practice. Today, 20 Senators are committed members of the Foster Youth caucus. It's a bipartisan caucus that focuses on understanding the challenges that foster youth face and the solutions that can improve their lives.

Today's hearing is being held with the same goal in mind. We must better understand the challenges faced by youth who are involved in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. We must better understand what we can do to improve policies and practices to help this vulnerable population, known as “crossover youth” by researchers.

Currently, there are over 415,000 children living in foster care. Each one of these foster youth deserves a safe, loving and permanent home. These children have experienced abuse or neglect, often both. They can be moved from home to home, transferred from one school to the next, and endure trauma and mental health challenges along the way.

Older foster youth face particularly difficult obstacles. They deal with separation from their parents, educational instability, separation disorders and depression, as well as the challenge of transitioning to adulthood on their own. Approximately 23,000 youth aged out of the foster care system in 2014.

Unfortunately, far too many youth are dually-involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Crossover youth are a high-need population, who are currently being drastically underserved.

In many jurisdictions, the child welfare system and juvenile justice system have little or no interaction or coordination, and even simple information sharing is limited or non-existent. Some other jurisdictions do not even recognize that such interaction or information sharing is necessary.

One of our first challenges in responding to the crossover youth phenomenon is in identifying these youth. Unfortunately, there is only limited research showing some of their key characteristics. The relationship between child maltreatment and delinquency is well established. A disproportionate number are children of color. A majority have special education issues, significant academic problems, mental health struggles, or chemical dependency. A significant portion have witnessed a domestic violence incident and have parents who have a criminal history, mental health problems, or substance abuse issues. On average, crossover youth are between the ages of 14 and 16, but their first juvenile offense often occurs at a younger age than youth in the general juvenile population.

For youth who are connected to both the child welfare and the juvenile justice systems, there are very few options for placements and services. If they are unhappy with their foster care placement, they may run away. On the other hand, incarceration or detention sends an inappropriate message to these children that they are criminals. In most cases, incarceration fails to connect these youth with the medical and psychological services they need.

I hope today's hearing will spark innovative solutions. And I hope it will forge relationships between two distinct groups--the juvenile justice system and child welfare system. The experts in these fields must come together to help dually-involved youth who are in need of services.

It's also a renewed call for Congress to pass the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Reauthorization Act, which I introduced with Senator Whitehouse last year. If this measure's enacted, states participating in the juvenile justice formula grants program couldn't lock up foster care children merely for running away from a foster home. Some of these runaways are fleeing abusive situations and detention isn't the right place for them. Our bill, which awaits action by the full Senate, also encourages states receiving juvenile justice formula grants to screen children with mental illness or substance abuse issues. Finally, our bill would encourage states to rely on policies and practices that reflect the most recent research on what works best with troubled youth.

Almost four years ago to the day, this committee held a hearing entitled "Protecting Our Children – The Importance of Training Child Protection Professionals." That hearing, organized by then Chairman Leahy back in 2012, raised awareness of policies surrounding child abuse and neglect. We heard from the head of Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. It laid the foundation for our bipartisan work on last year's juvenile justice bill.

Foster youth long to be heard. While this population of youth deserves year-round attention, May is National Foster Care Month. This is an especially important time to have discussions about how we can improve their lives, strengthen their families, and reduce the number of already vulnerable youth from crossing over. It's important, too, that we remember all of the other individuals involved in helping children who are in the foster care system—including caseworkers, social workers, guardians, child welfare advocates, and foster families. I want to thank the witnesses here today for their contributions to foster youth.

I appreciate all of our witnesses testifying today. I am honored that we have with us today Ms. Lisa Nelson of Iowa's Third Judicial District in Sioux City. She will share her expertise on youth who are victims of abuse or neglect and encounter the juvenile justice system.

I also want to highlight the example of Ms. Sonya Brown who is here today to share her personal experience in Louisiana's foster care and juvenile justice system. She will be a voice for so many across the country who are struggling for permanency, security, and a promising future.