

Testimony of

Denise Moore

Field Hearing: The New Era in the Fight Against Methamphetamine in Iowa

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Good morning, I would like to thank you for allowing me to share my experience with you today. My name is Denise Moore and I am a Service Area Coordinator with the Iowa Department of Human Services Parent Partner Program employed by Children & Families of Iowa. Parent Partners are parents who have successfully navigated the child welfare system and reunited with their children and then are trained to assist and support families that are entering the child welfare system. The majority of families that come to the attention of the child welfare system are due to neglect and many of these families are affected by substance abuse. These families are often treated with a one size fits all approach no matter the severity of their addiction, resulting with their children being removed from their care. These interventions are traumatizing for both the children and their families. Parent Partners takes a different approach. Our personal experience and training ensures a trauma-informed approach. Parent Partners have the ability to communicate and empathize with parents building trust and helping resolve the family issues, including achieving sobriety, more quickly.

I am a mother of 7 children who had my children removed due to my methamphetamine use, and from that experience would like to add a different perspective on today's discussion and hopefully shed some light on the desperation and hopelessness of parents affected by methamphetamine (meth) and the children that are left behind. As a service area coordinator of the Parent Partner Program in Iowa, we see families that are being destroyed by meth every day. Statewide the Parent Partner Program is working with over 1,600 parents today with the anticipation of 1,800 by year end.

As a Parent Partner, I understand the experience. The fear, the concern, the panic, but I also understand how to move beyond and achieve the goals that work most importantly for the kids, but also for the community and the best outcomes.

As a country, it makes sense to invest to help and support families at the front end. We need trauma informed care which is just understanding where people are and come from and what they dealt with. It is real and when used well changes the dynamic for families, including those suffering from addiction. We can and should help families like my family move from crisis, to recovery to giving back to our community.

I would like to focus on today's discussion on creating systems that support recovery and allow families to heal together as a unit. To best understand this I would like to share my personal experience. In 2003, I was arrested for conspiracy to deliver meth after living most of my life addicted to multiple substances. I had grown up in a world of substance abuse, sexual abuse, drugs, and domestic violence. It was the only world I knew and it was my norm. Although I wanted something different for my life, I had no idea how to accomplish that. As a result, at the very early age of 12 I started using substances, at first it was casual using but then escalated into selling drugs to finance my habit and to support my family. All

the while my children were subjected to everything that I swore I would never do including drug traffic in their home, seeing me be beaten until I was unrecognizable, and being ashamed and worried about their mother's activities. My children have lost so much by seeing the people they love become incarcerated due to addiction but still they needed me, loved, and accepted me for all that I was.

When I was arrested, my family proceeded to immediately get me out of jail because we knew that the Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) was coming and that my children would be removed and could be sent to multiple foster homes. DHS did come but an angel came to my door who saw my family as a unit and that my children needed to be together. My mother was allowed to come into my home and I was removed in a matter of minutes. This intervention was critical to the success of not only me but also my children. At this time in child welfare it was unheard of to have a relative placement and for the children to remain in a drug home but this was critical to the success of my family. My children were together, attending the same school, had the same coaches, teachers, and friends. The only thing that was missing was me.

I was sent a case plan in the mail, was homeless, with no education, no driver's license, no money, no job and was completely alone. So I continued to do what I had always known and that was to get high on meth. I continued on that path for approximately a year and a half until I was at termination of parental rights. My case worker lined all my children on the couch including my brand new baby and I had to tell them I was going to lose them forever. My oldest son who had loved me no matter what, had followed me, and believed in me was absolutely crushed because I was choosing drugs over him. I left that meeting and cried for the first time for as long as I could remember for all that I have done to my children, for all the pain from my own childhood, and all that I have lost due to my drug addiction.

I had a meeting with DHS following that meeting and I begged for one more chance. To my surprise they said yes, since all I had ever heard until then is that once your children were removed you never get them back. Looking back now I have seen a parent's rights being terminated for much less than I had done. I vowed to stay clean, starting attending AA meetings, started going to college, got a job and slowly had my children returned to me. I have been clean from drugs for over 10 years.

I was successfully reunited with my children after being away from them for 18 months and my case was closed after 2 years. Since then my children and my family have overcome challenges and withstood many barriers and have become upstanding members of society. My children and I have broken the cycle of addiction and they have gone on to have amazing and wonderful lives. They have healthy relationships, four have graduated high school, they are going to college, buying houses and building families.

Unfortunately, these outcomes and interventions are the exception and not the rule. We need more substance abuse treatment programs that focus on keeping families together. Support also is needed for relatives that step in to take care of our children. My hope is that we will recognize that incarceration and removals leave a trail of destruction for families in their path. I am proof that parents with meth addiction can recover and can create nurturing and stable homes for their children. No one wants to be addicted to meth but most people don't know how to stop.

Through my work with parents and families both across the state and nationally I have seen many children that are growing up without their parents or extended families and have been taken away from

their communities. It is critical that we start looking at these families as a whole and wrap services around them so they heal together and have healthy stable lives that are drug free.

Thank you for your time. I would be happy to take any questions.