

Chairman Larson and members of the Judiciary Committee. It is my pleasure to stand before you and introduce SB2340. This bill would give the courts the ability to terminate the rights of a biological parent if the parent has had no physical or verbal contact with the child for five years

As a foster mother and the mother of two adopted sons, I understand the excitement of growing your family and forming those bonds with a forever family. I also know from the children I have had in my home the pain of absent parents and sense of not really belonging anywhere. Unfortunately, in our country we have children who are stuck in a state of limbo when they don't meet all the requirements for adoption by a family that loves them and wants to adopt.

That is the reason for this bill. The family I am talking about is a blended family. The father had a daughter by a previous wife and the wife abandoned the family and moved overseas with another man. After the divorce, the father received custody of the daughter and the mother was to pay child support to him. In this case, the mother did not consistently pay child support and hasn't paid for several years. She has not seen the child in years and the only contact has been a yearly birthday.

The father remarried and his new wife has been raising this child since she was 6 years old. The new wife would like to adopt the girl to give her a sense that she belongs and is a permanent member of the family. The child is experiencing some emotional difficulties because of the lack of a permanent connection to her now stepmother. However, because of one sentence in North Dakota Century Code, which says that the rights of a biological parent cannot be involuntarily terminated if there is contact at least once a year, has kept that from happening. The court in this case feels the yearly birthday counts as contact.

I am asking in this bill that we add the word "physical or verbal" in front of the word contact to open the way for the courts to allow the involuntary termination of parental rights when there is no meaningful interaction between a child and a biological parent. Every child deserves a forever family and permanence. This slight change will allow this child and others in the state to achieve this status.

I will stand for questions.