

I came here today asking for your support on HB 1457.

My name is Tasha Gorentz, I have 5 years of experience as a foster parent in Cass County, North Dakota. During those 5 years, I have had 22 foster children come through my home.

A few years ago, I had a 6 month old little boy come into my home through foster care. He had been severely neglected and even though he was 6 months old, was basically a new born baby. He was not able to physically do anything a typical 6 month old should, like hold his own head up for example.

My family fell in love with him immediately and let his case worker know that if he became adoptable, my family wanted to be considered.

For a year my family worked hard with his therapy team to get him caught up physically, developmentally and emotionally. During this time my family was his family. He bonded to me through love and support. He felt safe and all of his needs were met. To him I was his mom.

We were informed that his biological mom had made enough progress and he was being returned to her with shared supervised custody with his maternal grandmother.

I did not feel confident in the county's decision, but since I was "just the foster parent" I had no say in his permanency and was forced to pack up his life and his things and send him back to a home that had originally neglected his needs.

A few short months later I get a call from his case worker and my biggest fear was confirmed. I rush to the emergency room and was in complete shock seeing my little boy completely covered in bruises from head to toe. The perfect image of a handprint bruise across his little cheek still haunts me to this day. That was the only one his clothing didn't conceal, but the ones on his thighs and across his little bottom were even worse.

My family took our little boy home and started the process of healing him physically and emotionally all over again.

I watched his bruises fade.

I laid with him and comforted him through the night terrors.

I slowly watched as my sweet, happy, smart and sassy little boy slowly started to feel safe and find himself again.

I made sure his case worker knew AGAIN that he had a home with us and we wanted to adopt him. We celebrated the day his parental rights were terminated, relieved as it was one step closer to keeping him safe.

Families who step up to foster children go through so much. As rewarding as our work is, it's equally as difficult, testing our hearts every step of the way.

For a year and a half, we were this little boy's safe place. Through both physical and emotional neglect and traumatic physical abuse, his definition of family had been changed from those of biology to us. To my family, the ones who wrapped him in our love and light and fought for his growth, happiness and stability. I celebrated his first two birthdays, his first two Christmases. I taught him to use sign language, to talk, to walk and to run. To him, I was his mom. To him, we were his family.

At 2 years and 3 months old, right in the middle of essential nurturing and development milestones, after all he had already endured and was just finally starting to move on from, this little boy was ripped out of the only safe home he had ever known, out of my home and was adopted to people who were complete strangers to him.

HB 1475 would provide more and quicker stability for children who have already faced the enormous emotional traumas that caused them into foster care to begin with by allowing the homes they have been in and thrived in to become their permanency plan through foster adoption.

It would also support foster families, like my own, giving us adoptive rights and helping to prevent some of the loss and trauma we experience being the soldiers on the front line of foster care.