

SB 1534

My name is Tasha Gorentz. I have 5 years of experience providing foster care in Cass County and have adopted one child.

I came here today in support of SB 1534 due to my personal experience adopting as a foster parent and seeing first hand the additional trauma the drawn out process of adoption gave my son.

My first child was the kinship placement of my youngest biological half-brother with whom I share a biological father. My little brother entered the foster care system while our father was incarcerated for selling and using meth and his mother faced eviction while struggling with her own addiction and mental health issues. I immediately got started on the rigorous home study training and was eventually granted my foster care license.

I found myself stepping up to be the instant caretaker of a very neglected, terrified, emotionally shut down 8 year old little boy.

My father hadn't allowed me to be very present in my brother's life during the few years before he entered care, so I hadn't been aware of things that had been happening but it didn't take long for the trauma this young man endured to start painting pictures of themselves. Physical domestic abuse, mental and emotional abuse, sexual assault, pornography addictions, school truancy and child neglect were just a few of the traumatic events that were normalized in this home.

My brother was afraid to ride the school bus on his own, so I drove behind it convoy style every day for weeks until he finally felt safe.

He didn't feel safe sleeping in a bedroom alone and would describe nightmares about his dad's drug addict friends breaking in the bedroom window with a gun and kidnapping him to get ransom money.

We would have panic attacks regularly due to various triggers that would remind him of being in the care of his parents and he would completely disassociate and shut down.

We started weekly therapy and started the work of making him feel safe and trying to help him heal from abuse and neglect he suffered for years. We felt like we were making some progress but we hit a wall when he would start wondering about his future and asking if he was going to have to go back with his parents.

The hardest part of trying to stabilize and protect this child emotionally was not being able to ensure him that I would always be able to keep him safe.

Reunification is always the initial goal. As a foster parent, I support the plan and hope that reunification can be achieved in the best interest of the child or children that come into care. However, we all know that reunification is not always appropriate.

His entire team, case worker, therapist, school staff, foster parent and the child all knew that reunification was not appropriate in this situation. However his biological parents were granted chance after chance after chance to start making progress to show they wanted him back. My brother ended up writing personal letters to both his biological mom and dad begging them to terminate parental rights and allow him to be adopted because he didn't want to exist in limbo any longer. He wanted some answers as to what his future was going to be. He wanted the anxiety over wondering what will happen and when to stop. He wanted safe permanency.

His parental rights were terminated and he was very excited, but then we had to start the adoption home study process. The anxiety he thought would pass with termination, didn't because he still had to wait and wait and wait.

It took three long years from time of placement to finalizing adoption. Three years for this young man who had already been through so much to finally be able to feel like he could get comfortable with the idea that he would always be safe. That he was home and that he wasn't going anywhere.

I am in support of this bill because I believe we work as a team in the best interest of the children who end up in the foster care system.

Being removed from a child's family/home is traumatic no matter what the reasons requiring removal are. These children deserve permanency assurance as soon as they can get it so they can start taking the steps to heal. They shouldn't be forced to wait additional months while their adoptive parents are subject to another repetitive home study when the adoption process can be structured to better support the foster to adopt process in the situations when it truly is the best option.

In addition to benefiting the children, restructuring the foster to adopt process would also be of great benefit to adoptive parents as well. The repetitive home study, the lengthy, drug out process and the wait of the adoption approval process is a great stress to those providing care for children. It can be so emotionally draining waiting to be approved again after already providing care for a child in your home. After welcoming a child into your life and loving them as a part of your family. It can be so painful to know a child will not be going home to their biological family but not knowing if or when your application to adopt them will be approved.

Why are foster parents seen as good enough to provide care for but not good enough to parent?

If you trust the home study for foster care to approve families who sometimes end up providing care for kids for years before they either start an additional home study for adoption or the child

ends up aging out of the system, why would you not trust them to also an approved permanency option for the same children?

I believe that both foster and adoptive homes should be treated with the same requirements.

I believe that one thorough, in depth, home study should set the standard for both foster and foster to adopt parents. It would be in the best interest of the kids we all work so hard to support by streamlining adoption approval when adoption is appropriate.