

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Coleen Brasch and I am the Executive Director All About U Adoptions, a licensed child placing agency in the state of North Dakota. I write to offer testimony in opposition of HB1556.

This testimony is not without extreme empathy for the parents and family members impacted by the types of circumstances that lead to the decision to terminate parental rights to a child they adopted. We provide post placement counseling to many families who are encountering unexpected extreme behaviors due to exposures to drugs and alcohol during pregnancy, attachment struggles, and mental health diagnoses. We know how powerless these parents feel to fight these battles in their homes daily, to advocate for their children, and to find adoption-competent and trauma-informed professionals to help.

However, we believe there are systems and processes in place through the state to ensure the needs of these children and families are met while exploring every possible avenue before the last resort of children losing another set of parents. That process is designed to ensure that families are given the opportunity to explore all available support services, including community based behavioral health treatment services and options to explore out of home care to ensure the safety of the family without terminating parental rights. Furthermore, the process to relinquish parental rights of a child should not be any different simply because they became parents through adoption.

Families with biological children also encounter emotional, behavioral, and physical challenges that were unexpected. No one sets out on a parenting journey knowing what lies ahead; however, one could argue that adoptive families might be more aware of the potential challenges they may encounter. When families begin the process to adopt, they are required to undergo a home assessment that involves training that specifically address the trauma and loss at the heart of adoption. We emphasize that even a child placed at birth experiences trauma and will have impacts from whatever circumstances defined the pregnancy as a crisis pregnancy for the birth mother. They are educated about the effects of exposures in utero, the grief of losing their birth families, and the lifelong impact of adoption through a developmental lens. Those adopting older children learn about the impact of adverse childhood experiences and the impact of multiple traumatic events in a child's life prior to placement.

This is not to say "I told you so" to the families that face challenges they never anticipated. It simply explains the fact that there has been some early groundwork laid out to help families be watchful for the emotional, physical and behavioral needs of their children. Families are informed at all stages of the adoption process about the multitude of post-adoption services available in the state of North Dakota, regardless of whether the adoption was private or through the state (which is generous of North Dakota, as not every

state our agency is licensed in offers those resources to families who privately adopted). A specific piece of the home assessment is confirming that a family is ready to remain committed to the child indefinitely. When a family finalizes their adoption, they testify in front of a judge that the child will be treated the same as if they were naturally born to the parent(s). Once that adoption is finalized, adopted children have the same rights as if they were biological children. This legal equivalence extends to all areas of family law, and therefore should apply to families facing extreme circumstance. Every single family, regardless of how it was created, deserves support, resources, and help finding services that provide stability and healing when they encounter challenges. But a child that joins a family by adoption is entitled to the same protection of a biological child when it comes to following an already established process to explore options when that child needs care that is beyond the scope of a family's capabilities.

For the reasons stated above, as an adoption professional and as an adoptive parent, I ask for you to vote no on HB1556