

House Federal and State Affairs Committee

March 20, 2018

HB 2687

Testimony by Steven Roach, Executive Director, Catholic Charities Diocese of Springfield in Illinois In support of protecting faith based adoption providers.

My name is Steven Roach and I have worked for Catholic Charities for over 32 years. I am writing in support of HB 2687 in order to provide protection for faith based adoption and providers and to keep the focus of this issue only on what is in the best interest of these very vulnerable children.

For over 40 years, Catholic Charities in Illinois had partnered with the Illinois Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) in providing foster care and adoption services for the state's abused and neglected children. Both parties agreed that it was a highly successful partnership, effectively providing care and permanent loving homes for literally tens of thousands of these vulnerable children. The partnership saved taxpayers millions of dollars, since Catholic Charities provided the service for much cheaper than if the State provided the service. In addition, the partnership also enabled the State to capture tens of millions more in federal reimbursement because of the outstanding success Catholic Charities (and other private agencies) achieved in effectively providing these programs.

The State publically pronounced that the partnership in Illinois between DCFS and private agencies should serve as a national model to be replicated across the country as the best way to manage the tremendous difficulties of a statewide child welfare system. As one of the largest private agencies in the state, Catholic Charities was proud to have been an integral part of that successful model. Every year, Catholic Charities agencies ranked among the highest in meeting positive outcomes for children according to the State's own evaluation system. National accreditation was achieved through the Council On Accreditation (C.O.A.), verifying that Catholic Charities was meeting the most respected *best practice standards* in the industry. A plaque from the Governor of Illinois and the Director of DCFS hung in our office with the inscription, "In recognition of outstanding service in finding adoptive homes for special needs children."

For many decades, we worked closely with our colleagues at DCFS to ensure that the *best interest of children* was always the primary motivation for the services that were provided. It was a winning partnership. The children won because they were being provided with the highest quality care when they were placed with Catholic Charities. The State won because Catholic Charities helped DCFS meet the vast legal and federal requirements associated with the provision of child welfare services. The taxpayers of Illinois won because by privatizing 80% the child welfare system, the State annually saved millions. Catholic Charities won because these programs allowed us to fulfill one of the primary objectives of our religious mission – serving children in desperate need – the modern-day "orphans". A mission in Illinois we had been faithful to since the 1800's.

In 2011, the Religious Freedom Protection and Civil Unions Act was signed. It was legislation that would legally recognize individuals in a civil union as a married couple. According to the bill's sponsor during the Senate debate, nothing in the new law would **regulate or interfere** with "institutions of faith" operating "various agencies providing social services, retreats, religious camps, homeless shelters, senior service centers, adoption agencies, hospitals..." However, six weeks after its passage, Catholic Charities came under attack from the Attorney General's office accusing it of discrimination and in violation of the new law. Less than 6 months later, the State dismantled the entire Catholic Charities statewide network of foster care and adoption programs impacting thousands of children, foster parents and Catholic Charities staff members across Illinois. Two other faith based agencies were also systematically eradicated. We were no longer considered worthy of caring for these children and children should not

be exposed to our “bigotry.” Our crime is that we believe that marriage can only exist between a man and a woman. A 2000-year-old sincerely held religious belief. This was the only reason Catholic Charities was kicked out of foster care and adoption in Illinois. We believe that every child deserves a mother and father whenever possible, but the State refused to negotiate – our choice was to surrender our beliefs or get out.

In Illinois, the ACLU and other groups perpetuated many false narratives through a mostly accommodating media. The fact of the matter is that no LGBTQ couple was ever prevented from becoming a foster/adoptive parent in Illinois. The Illinois child welfare system is actually over capacitated to handle the small number of LGBTQ couples wanting to become foster/adoptive couples. There are over 50 private agencies and dozens of DCFS offices available to serve these couples.

Since 2011, this conflict has come to the forefront in many other states. What can never be forgotten in this conflict is that resolutions must be made in the best interest of children – the primary mandate in child welfare.

In the otherwise successful child welfare partnership between government and faith based agencies, a conflict has arisen which pits the claim of a civil rights violation versus a religious liberty violation. The partners are at an impasse and it remains a legal question that has yet to be resolved by the courts. Unfortunately, it has devolved into a contentious political debate with learned adults shouting “Anti-Gay” and “Anti-God” at each other while the kids suffer the consequences. And it has got to stop!

What is most important in this conflict is to find “kid focused” solutions that ensure adults who want to provide a loving foster or adoptive home will be served and that faith based agencies providing this service are not forced to surrender their sincerely held religious beliefs. This legislation accomplishes both of those things and it is the only solution that is truly serving the best interest of children. Other states have found their way to it.

Our country is facing a severe and chronic shortage of quality foster/adoptive homes for abused and neglected children and the opioid crises is dramatically exacerbating this shortage. When there are not enough good foster/adoptive homes available for these children, they suffer tremendously. Every year, thousands of them age out of the system and are dispatched into society on their own - never having found a forever family. Their prospects are bleak. We, as adults, MUST act in the best interest of these vulnerable children and do everything in our power to build the capacity of the foster care and adoption system – not tear it down. We must increase resources so that no child is ever denied the opportunity of a loving home and the chance to belong to a family. Sadly, in Illinois, children are in desperate need of foster homes every day while Catholic Charities, with its long history of recruiting tens of thousands of great foster and adoptive parents, is forced to sit on the sidelines and watch them suffer. It makes no sense. Please do not allow this travesty to happen in Kansas.

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