

Kristy Ann Blagg
Opponent statement on HB 2687
House Committee on Federal and State Affairs
March 21, 2018

Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the committee:

My name is Kristy Ann Blagg. I am a daughter. I am a sister. I am an aunt. I am a friend. I am a believer. I am a productive member of our society. I am a volunteer and organizer for many civic organizations throughout our community. I am a foster care recruitment specialist. I am also a mother.

For ten years, I worked in intensive supervision in Wyandotte County, KS. In doing so, I was able to work with many of the highest risk juvenile offenders in the state. Growing up with a fairly sheltered life in small-town Iowa, I had not been exposed to people who had committed crimes such as murder, rape, armed robbery, and sex offenses. Initially when I received the cases and would read the charges, my mind would race with scary images of young men and women who would do harm to me, monsters with no conscience that would surely only hurt others and themselves.

As I began to work with the juveniles and their families, I discovered broken children, not scary monsters. I saw families give up on these children- their futures washed down the drain of our legal system, resulting in them losing hope and motivation for a better future. I was compelled to help more than I was allowed to in my role as a supervision officer. I wanted to serve these children in a daily, tangible way.

Foster care seemed a good place to start. Our plan was to foster one child. Within a month, we had four children living in our home. People thought we were crazy, and at times, we felt crazy. But we loved the children, provided consistency, and watched as they and their families grew and thrived as a result of that love and the services they were provided in the community. Changes occurred. Bonds were formed and repaired. Children returned to their homes. More children came to our door.

When your home is full by state licensing standards, you are allowed to have an "exception" for a night. This is where a child can crash at your home. They can sleep on your couch, cot, wherever they can land so they're not stuck sleeping overnight in the offices of the foster care providers. The "exception kids" would come and go. A couple weeks would pass, and the same kids would return. "Why aren't you in a home yet?" I'd ask them. "There isn't anyone who wants me. I just keep getting traded in every day for better kids." This, of course, was not the case, but it broke my heart this is what they perceived.

As these children go from place to place every single day, they lose what few belongings they have. They do not get to go to school because they have no home base to go from. They do not

get their doctor appointments because they aren't anywhere long enough to establish a primary care physician. They show up with empty pill bottles, empty inhalers, empty tubes of ointments for different skin conditions. The more they move, the longer they are unsettled, the more their behaviors increase. This causes disruptions, sometimes landing them in hospitals to be stabilized. These "exception kids" are children that were removed, often due to neglect. And as a result of that removal, they are far worse off. There simply aren't enough foster parents to provide loving, consistent homes for these children. And so they suffer, experiencing trauma far beyond that which they were initially removed from.

I can not sleep at night thinking about these "exception kids." They aren't "exception kids" to me. They are exceptional kids put in an insufficient system which was created to keep them safe yet only causes them further harm. And so I began holding recruitment meetings on my own to ask individuals and families with loving hearts to consider foster care. Eventually, I left corrections to join a foster care agency to recruit people to foster. My life's purpose is to be sure I do all I can to help those children land in safe, loving places while their lives are in a state of chaos, due to no fault of their own. And that is why I am here today. To continue that work.

As I mentioned, there is a crisis in foster care. We simply do not have enough homes for the children who are being brought into state's custody. Currently in Wyandotte County alone, there are 658 children in foster care, yet only 200 beds for those children. That means 458 kids in one KS county alone are becoming "exception kids" or being farmed out to homes far from their own communities. This is unacceptable.

We are all here for the same reason today- to do what's in the best interest of the children. We all have a heart for these children or at least feel some sense of responsibility to take care of them. Whether your motivation is spiritual, financial, personal... the fact is, we know we have to do better by these children.

The bill you are considering, House Bill No. 2687, states, "Notwithstanding any other provision of state law, and to the extent allowed by federal law, no child placement agency shall be required to perform, assist, counsel, recommend, consent to, refer or otherwise participate in any placement of a child for foster care or adoption when the proposed placement of such child would violate such agency's sincerely held religious beliefs."

I ask that you would consider the following:

If people, such as those in the LGBT community, those of other religious backgrounds, and those with views that might violate an agency's "sincerely held religious beliefs," are prevented from fostering or adopting, there will be an even greater shortage of homes for these children. There will be more "exception kids" not receiving the care, love, and consistency they need and deserve. This is in direct opposition to what is in the best interest of these children.

As with the children I worked with at corrections, I think there is a fear of the unknown. I do not know if you know any LGBT families or families of different religious backgrounds personally. I

think if you allowed yourselves the chance to spend any time with them, you'd see they are no different than any other family. The families may look different and practice different customs, but again, I believe you'll see they are not unlike your own families. And I am certain, that any family you see that is succeeding as a unit, is one filled with love, consistency, and respect for each other- regardless of anything else.

I have heard concern expressed that children might be influenced to be gay if raised by gay or lesbian parents. All of the available evidence demonstrates that the sexual orientation of parents has no impact on the sexual orientation of their children and that children of lesbian and gay parents are no more likely than any other child to grow up to be gay. There is some evidence that children of gays and lesbians are more tolerant of diversity, but this is certainly not a disadvantage. Of course, some children of lesbians and gay men will grow up to be gay, as will some children of heterosexual parents. These children will have the added advantage of being raised by parents who are supportive and accepting in a world that can sometimes not be, such as this hearing today.

Many of you might think that a child needs a mother and a father in order to be raised sufficiently and successfully. I would remind you that children without homes have neither a mother or father to care for them and to serve as role models. There are many single parent households that raise successful children. Role models are found many places such as; other family members, grandparents, uncles, aunts, teachers, friends, and neighbors. A child raised in a household with same sex parents will have ample opportunities for plenty of mentors and role models as long as there is adequate community involvement and support.

I know there is also a fear that the government, the LGBT community, and private organizations, will try to shut down faith-based agencies. Representatives, I do not believe that to be the case. I believe those entities want, just like you do, for children to be loved and cared for. They simply ask that you allow them to provide that love and care. TOGETHER, we can accomplish this. This is not a matter of LGBT/liberals vs the church/conservatives. This is a matter of coming together for the common good- the best interest of the children.

Again, My name is Kristy Ann Blagg. I am a daughter. I am a sister. I am an aunt. I am a friend. I am a believer. I am a productive member of our society. I am a volunteer and organizer for many civic organizations throughout our community. I am a foster care recruitment specialist. I am a mother.

I am also a lesbian.

And that, Representatives, is irrelevant.

I believe in your hearts that serving the best interest of the children is your motivation, and so I would ask that you vote in a way that would allow others with hearts like your own to do the same.

Thank you.