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*Growing Families
Enriching Lives*

February 27, 2023

Re: HF1661

Dear Members of the Children and Families Committee,

I am writing in support of HF 1661 as the Executive Director of EVOLVE Family Services. Our agency has been providing child-centered family services in Minnesota for over 45 years, and since 2016, has been a leader in providing Kinship Foster Care services for children and families involved in the child welfare system. Since 2016, we have served over 500 youth in relative placements and 285 relative families.

Kinship families need responsive care and specialized support. Foster care licensing involves significant paperwork, background checks, trainings, home preparation, and an invasive assessment process. There are lengthy procedures for requesting reconsideration around issues with the potential to disqualify them. We have found that supporting kinship families through licensing takes more than double the time of working with non-relative foster parents.

Through our in-depth work with kin, we've witnessed many systemic challenges and gaps in care. Counties are not set up consistently or equitably with resources around kinship care. Families often have to navigate on their own, with little guidance or advocacy. In some cases, inadequate searches mean that relatives may never be engaged. Some relatives are even actively dissuaded, being told they have barriers, when these are often issues that can be overcome with support. If the county won't consider them, they are left on their own. Without support, they may feel the process is insurmountable and give up.

Community based organizations are well-positioned to reduce barriers for relative caregivers. We hold smaller caseloads, allowing us to provide personalized care, meet with families multiple times per month, walk through paperwork together, assist with obtaining necessary resources, provide in-person care throughout the placement, and work through concerns as they arise. In response to family needs, we provide specialized training on the unique dynamics of shifting roles as grandma, etc., to that of a trauma-informed parental caregiving role. We provide support in navigating dynamics within the larger family system, as caregivers can be a vital resource in reunifying children with their parents and preserving family relationships. As a result of this, families are having their needs met, getting resources established, and better able to support the youth in their care.

We need to do better by our children. This bill provides tangible resources to help our systems adapt, address barriers, and decrease the burden on counties, while giving families the option to seek services from qualified community-based providers. Thank you for your consideration and support of HF 1661.

Sincerely,

Susannah Barnes, LSW, CSW
Executive Director

Dedicated to a world where everyone has nurturing, permanent, and supportive familial relationships.

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