

March 8th, 2021

Dear Members of the House Human Services Finance and Policy Committee:

My name is Mary Lennick and I am the Executive Director at Family Alternatives. Family Alternatives is a private, child foster care agency located in Minneapolis. I am writing in support of HF1420, a bill dedicated to ensuring the comprehensive support of Minnesota's relative foster care providers.

We all agree (and the research confirms) that children in out-of-home placement do better when they are in the care of kin. Minnesota has done an exceptional job of prioritizing relative foster care and it is vital that we continue to build on this positive placement trend.

This work, however, extends far beyond the act of placing a child in a relative's home. The work, in fact, is just beginning.

In addition to an extensive list of licensing requirements, relative caregivers are also tasked with navigating a child protection system that is intimidating to most, particularly family members. They also face the complexities of parenting children that are related to them, but also not their own.

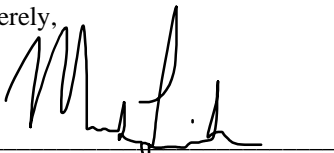
This work isn't simple. It's dynamic and critical and our relative caregivers deserve our greatest responses to actively support them as they navigate systems, and most importantly, care for their relative children. Unfortunately, many relative caregivers are not receiving the supports they need and deserve to help children in their care experience stability and support in their relative's home.

Family Alternatives receives calls weekly from relative caregivers struggling to get their needs met. Their struggles vary from confusion over the licensing process, to not receiving financial support for the children, to uncertainty about how the system works, including how to access needed services, or even how to get a county worker to return their call. A common story we hear is, "The county dropped the kids off at our home and we haven't heard anything since."

When Family Alternatives has offered its community-based services to relative providers, we are typically met with resistance by the counties who are not in a position to afford our service fee. Despite relative providers being told they have a choice in where they are licensed, counties often threaten to move the children in their care if they become licensed with a private provider. This is an experience shared by child foster care licensing agencies across the state and it is absolutely unacceptable.

Minnesota is home to community-based organizations that have the expertise and capacity to provide relative caregivers with the support they deserve. Counties should be financially supported by the state to help relative caregivers access the specific supports they need to care for relative children and keep the family together until reunification with parents or permanency with relatives. The counties do not have to do it all: community-based service providers are here, we are ready, and we have the infrastructure in place to support successful relative placements.

Sincerely,



Mary Lennick, LICSW
Executive Director