

LD 699 An Act to Create a Kinship Care Navigator Program within the Department of Health and Human Services

Testimony in Opposition

March 16, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Jessica Gleason. I am here today to speak in opposition to this bill and to recommend an amendment of it proposing that the Kinship Care Navigator Program not be housed within DHHS.

In 2015 I learned 1st hand of the trials and tribulations of Kinship Care as I became a 6-month safety plan for my 1 year old niece. The subsequent two and a half years, more precisely for 907 days, I solely navigated the child protective services within DHHS and guided a ship through uncharted waters without a compass or a navigator. This journey is one that should never be done without an experienced captain at the stern. The tides change quickly when sailing on the DHHS seas. During our 2 ½ year journey we were assigned 8 different case workers and 2 different supervisors. I jumped through hurdles to ensure the safety of my niece. I walked on eggshells with DHHS out of fear that my niece would be removed from my care and placed with strangers. I paid for her medical expenses, her childcare, her car seat, and all essentials as DHHS informed me as her Aunt it was my responsibility.

At the conclusion of two tortuous years a termination of parental rights was scheduled for the Monday before Thanksgiving. The Friday prior to that Monday DHHS again violated trust and jeopardized the safety and best interest of my niece by pulling their TPR and starting an immediate trial home placement. In this moment I stopped walking on eggshells filing an Ombudsman complaint and hiring my own attorney at the recommendation of our Guardian Ad Litem. I won that Ombudsman complaint and I lost \$3,000.00 on the attorney. But at the end of the day, I could lay my head on my pillow knowing I had at least tried, unlike the DHHS case workers and the assistant attorney general. Ultimately 907 days later after 30 days of increased trauma, torture, and abuse due to DHHS trial in home placement, my niece was safe. From Aunty to Mom, from Niece to Daughter, her journey to safety was over and her life of recovery from adverse childhood experiences could begin.

From my introduction you can recognize the necessity of a kinship navigator. Why then do I speak today in opposition of LD 699? If we look deeper into LD 699 we learn that in 2017 a Kinship Advisory Group was formed as the result of a conversation initiated by LD 270. The group included representatives from the State Legislature, State Government, academia, kinship caregivers, agencies that work with children and families, child protection attorneys, and other interested parties. They met seven times through the summer and fall of 2017 and twice in 2018. In their final report, which was submitted to Senator Eric Brakey and the Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services on February 5, 2018 they concluded, and I quote that the “Kinship Navigator program should operate independent of DHHS and would

report to a Board of Directors specifically constituted to oversee the position (in much the same way as the current Child Welfare Ombudsman reports to an independently constituted Board of Directors that is, similarly, independent of DHHS or other State agencies)” end quote. On another note, in a report produced by Generations United in 2009 and 2012 A Family Connections Grant established through the passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 was established. 2018 Congress passed the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 allocating up to 50% of a state or Tribes costs in implementing a kinship navigator program. In an effort to meet California Clearing house regulations and follow evidence-based practice to ensure allocation of funds it is the direction of Generations United that and again, I quote “House the program in trusted community organizations, not the child welfare agency. In general, with very few exceptions, these programs should not be housed in the child welfare agency because of trust issues. Caregivers often fear that the children could be removed from their care by the child welfare agency and put into non-related foster care. As a result, caregivers and children may be hesitant to seek services or to share critical information needed to ensure they receive the appropriate supports for their family’s needs” end quote.

Fear of DHHS, absolutely, I testify firsthand at the rightful fear and lack of trust I developed with DHHS. They worked with blinders on without consideration of the safety and best interest of my niece, evident by the emergency room visit and stitches she needed following the first hour of the first unsupervised visit when she was found in a hotel room with her head cut open and the bio mom “working” in another room. The next day my niece was returned to endure 30 more days of trauma. My fear and lack of trust of DHHS is undeniable. What we also cannot deny is the breadth and depth that many individuals have spent painstakingly evaluating the Kinship Navigator program and their conclusion that it should be held outside DHHS.

Housing the Kinship Navigator Program inside DHHS is like housing it within a circus. A sit on the edge of your seat during the lion tamer act part of the circus. One can not trust, or feel safely guided if they are waiting for the lion to jump through the door. While I support and recognize the necessity of the Kinship Navigator Program, I am appalled at the blatant neglect of this bill to fail to recognize the efforts of past committees and to fail to respect those committees’ recommendations of housing the program outside DHHS.

In closing I ask that the committee consider opposing this bill in its current form and reconsider an amendment with the Kinship Navigator Program to be housed outside DHHS.

Thank you,

Jessica Gleason