



CONGRESSIONAL HEARING
“MAKING A DIFFERENCE FOR FAMILIES AND FOSTER YOUTH”
Wednesday, May 12, 2021

Chairman Davis, Congresswoman Walorski, And House Ways and Means “Worker and Family Support Subcommittee Members”,

I can’t begin to tell you what an honor it is to provide testimony for you this morning! The outstanding BIPARTISAN Leadership which you all are exemplifying, on behalf of our nation’s most vulnerable children and their families, is exactly what they need and deserve! It is also reflective of those of us who are privileged to have been “called” to child and family services and how collaboratively, WE, TOO, must work on their behalf! It is only by demonstrating and actualizing the POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS, that we can truly create positive outcomes for those we’re honored to serve...building “bridges” of communication and collective impact between child welfare, mental health, education, judicial, faith-based and community organizations!

I retired on April 18th after serving 29 years as the President & CEO of The Villages of Indiana, our state’s largest child and family services accredited non-profit agency; prior to that was Indiana’s State Child Welfare Director; and also served, many years, as the Regional Downstate Director of Children’s Home and Aid Society of Illinois.

Like each of you here, I value the ENTIRE continuum of child and family services, from the vital need for primary prevention...resources, information, and supports for EVERY parent and caregiver; to the need that, sadly, we will always have in this country for more intensive care, including therapeutic foster care, wrap around mental health services, and quality residential programs. Just as is the case in the health care arena, we need a strong, high quality array of services from the least restrictive...those “drop in” urgent care centers, to the trauma centers, which though, are less frequently utilized, are vital to sustain life in a critical care situation. High quality, culturally respectful, evidence informed services are essential at EVERY level of our state and national child and family services’ systems. It’s the ONLY way we can possibly meet each and every child and family “in need”, where THEY are!

As Indiana’s largest therapeutic foster care provider, The Villages serves between 750 and 800 different foster children EACH Year; and 89% of them, annually, are in ONLY ONE VILLAGE’S FOSTER HOME! Thus, 9 out of every 10 foster children The Villages is privileged to serve, have the stability of ONE nurturing foster family! My sense is that YOU, like ME, want to salute and THANK EVERY foster parent in our country who have opened their hearts, their homes, and their lives to create a BRIGHTER FUTURE for abused, neglected and abandoned children during this Annual FOSTER PARENT APPRECIATION MONTH! How do we sustain, year after year, such an unprecedented stability and permanency rate? Just like ANY great team, The Villages must constantly recruit quality foster families, to have a strong, deep, continual BENCH STRENGTH! Only then, are we able to meet EACH child’s unique needs, ethnically, geographically, educationally, emotionally and spiritually!!

Meet little Arianna! She was NEVER supposed to be able to walk, talk or see---but she has defied ALL the odds, thanks to her foster Dad, a respiratory therapist, and her foster Mom, a nurse. They regulate her oxygen EVERY night; and now, along with their biological son and daughter, have become Arianna's adoptive FOREVER FAMILY!

The flexible resources that you all have helped provide agencies like The Villages through the COVID CARES Act have been invaluable! Arianna needed a portable oxygen tank, so she could crawl first...and then slowly learn to walk! You helped us provide that!

Equally heroic, are the KINSHIP CAREGIVERS in Indiana! 59,000 children are being raised by kin with NO parent present and 146,869 children are living in homes where a non-parental relative is the head of their household. Twins JADA and JAYDEN are the 15th and 16th relative children raised by MISS ANTA, one of The Villages many kinship caregivers! They both have perfect attendance in school and JADA received the Principal's Award!

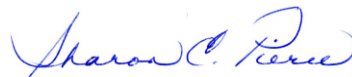
MISS SHARVONNE has put her single life "completely on hold" for the last seven years. Because Sharvonne's Mother, in New York, was facing serious health issues, Sharvonne moved her younger brother, JOSEPH, to Indianapolis and became his legal guardian! He's completing High School, has a job, and just received his Driver's License!

The COVID-19 Pandemic has made the selfless roles of foster, adoptive and kinship caregivers more challenging than EVER! But thanks to YOUR COLLECTIVE SUPPORT, we've been able to provide PORCH PANTRIES, with vital food; cleaning supplies critical to keep each household safe; diapers for the nearly 45% of Indiana foster children who are 4 and under; hot spots, ipads, stronger internet connections, and virtual tutoring for the school-aged children; and virtual SUPPORT GROUPS for these dedicated caregivers who are standing in the gap for children...the 3,100 children we serve through all of our programs, EVERY DAY!

Not ALL of us can be a foster, adoptive or kinship care parent, but we CAN ALL support their selfless commitment to our nation's most vulnerable children! Despite the experience of child abuse and neglect that far too many of America's children are faced with, they CAN and DO HEAL!

Thank you for helping us support the caregivers in Indiana who are doing JUST THAT! You're a VITAL PARTNER in this life-changing MISSION to CHAMPION FAMILIES FOR CHILDREN! These children are beyond worthy of our support, for they are the ONLY FUTURE our nation has!

Respectfully Submitted,



Sharon E. Pierce
Immediate Past President & CEO
The Villages of Indiana