

December 5th, 2019

Congresswoman Angie Craig

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Dear Congresswoman Craig,

I am writing to you to bring your attention to a subject that, as you are already aware, is thrown under the rug far too often: racial and socio-economical bias in the child welfare and foster care system. More specifically, the rampant discrimination by social workers and caseworkers in the system against families who belong to minority groups and/or who are trapped in the depths of poverty. According to an article on racial bias in U.S. foster care from Marquette Law Review, African American, Native American, Hispanic, and bi-racial children are removed from their homes and are placed in foster care at higher rates than their white counterparts - despite their being no real difference in child maltreatment rates between races. Children of color and/or who are poor also stay in foster care longer, and they and their families are much less likely to receive support and reunification services from their workers and child welfare in general. Certified Child Welfare Law Specialist Professor Tanya Asim Cooper also states that social workers from non-impoverished backgrounds tend to favor keeping a child in foster care, rather than keeping the child with their family and providing services.

I know that this is a subject that is near to your heart, as you fought a discrimination case of your own while in the process of adopting your oldest son, Josh – and have faced open discrimination while continuing to build your family. You have also co-sponsored the bipartisan *Every Child Deserves A Family Act*, in order to end discrimination of LGBTQ foster and adoptive parents, as well as discrimination against LGBTQ foster youth. Families of color and families who are poor experience the same discrimination you have faced (and worked to end) when working with child welfare and foster care.

I am a 23-year-old college student at Inver Hills Community College, and a mother of four myself. In my English and Psychology classes this semester, we have diligently studied and researched the U.S. foster care system. We have also hosted a panel of former foster youth from the St. Paul area in class, who bravely shared their stories and experiences in foster care, and what their involvement with child welfare was like. We heard the raw reality of a broken and discriminatory system.

Foster care is a personal aspect of my own life. My husband has five adopted siblings, all of whom were adopted from foster care, and all of whom came from

impoverished families who were Native American, African American, and Hispanic. Foster care and adoption has built a huge part of my family.

Again according to Tanya Asim Cooper, being poor is largely seen in the system as "coinciding with faulty parenthood and unworthy character." I strongly believe that social workers, caseworkers, and others that come into the lives of families during open child protection cases need specific training on what the signs of abuse and neglect are versus what poverty looks like, so children aren't yanked from their homes for the wrong reasons. I also believe that these same workers need training on how to be more culturally informed and attentive when working with families of color, so they can build trusting relationship with these families – because as Cooper also states, "What social workers call neglect is often poverty, or cultural tradition." These trainings should be mandatory when hiring all new social workers, caseworkers, and all others in child welfare in Minnesota, as well as required re-training annually to be on top of providing the most universal care to all children and families in the system. Proponents to this may say child welfare doesn't have the time to put this into place, or the money to hire staff to provide these trainings – however, Minnesota would save hundreds of thousands of dollars every year by lessening child removals, and using cheaper and more effective ways of working with families in child protection.

By pushing for a change like this in the Minnesota Legislature, we can collaboratively start to diminish the war on the poor and people of color in the system. Not only would workers be able to understand the cultures and norms of other racial groups better, but they would be able to provide more personalized and trusting services to families. By being able to decipher the difference between poverty and abuse/neglect, unnecessary child removals would end, and families would be able to stay together while working with social services in navigating resources to reduce the burden poverty has on a family. Professors Joan Kaufman and Arazais Oliveros point out in their article on different child welfare interventions that family-based approaches – also called "building stronger families" - which involve children being kept in the home with their parents while the family is provided home-based services, has time and time again come out on top as being the most effective method when working with families who have open child protection cases. This would help build a better serving child welfare system and help mold foster care into its true purpose.

You, out of many others, understand discrimination - and you can assist in changing the way minorities and poor people are treated in the system. Thank you again for not only your time, but your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

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References

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