

Good morning Madam Chair and members of the committee. My name is Lori Wolff and I am the deputy director for the Department of Health and Welfare. Thank you for the opportunity to share the Department's perspective on the Foster Care bill today. I want to start by expressing my appreciation and respect for the Senators and Representatives who served on the Interim Foster Care Committee and gave of their time to hear testimony, ideas, perspectives, and thoughts from many different stakeholders impacted by the Child Protection System. It has often been said that child protection is one of the more contentious and challenging areas of policy making and implementation because of the multiple stakeholders, high stakes, and critical outcomes this system serves. I want to acknowledge the bill's sponsors as well as those who provided input on the important policies contained in this bill. Specifically, I would like to acknowledge members of the Youth Advisory Board who informed the policy on the importance of sibling connections and the long-term impacts of those placement decisions on their lives.

Most of this bill is very good and codifies important practices and judicial rules that are already in place and critical to the ongoing improvements in the child protection system. We applaud the addition of the language added to maintain sibling bonds by placing siblings in the same home when possible. The Department supports codifying the language around contested placements that currently lives in Judicial Rule and aligns with current practice. We also support prioritizing safety assessments for those referrals made on individuals who have prior convictions of L&L conduct or felony injury to a child. On this particular item, I want to point out that for the Department to operationalize this requirement, we will need to build a data exchange and matching process which will have a fiscal impact that is not included in the statement of purpose. The Department also supports the 90-day minimum requirement for protective supervision or extended home visits, under certain circumstances, prior to the court vacating a child protection case. Today we average about 102 days for extended home visits, so this aligns with current practice.

The Department also fully supports the concept of Citizen Review Panels. Under the Department's Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) grant obligations, we are required to establish Citizen Review Panels who examine policies, procedures and practices, as well as review child protection cases. We currently have seven review panels set up statewide who do this work. The panels provide insight and recommendations to the Department via an annual report which we in turn incorporate into system improvement efforts and provide to our federal partners annually. The value of the citizen review panels is their unique perspective in seeing the impact of our Child Protection system within their communities. The functions of these panels are to accomplish three things: Evaluate local and state CPS systems to ensure they are working together and discharging their responsibilities through the review of state plans, standards, and policies. 2. Provide public outreach and collect comments to assess the impact of CPS policies, procedures and practice on children and families in the communities, and finally to advocate for relevant changes in support of improvements in the Child Protection system. These are certainly roles we value and support.

With that said, we want to voice concern the Department has with the volume of open cases these panels are required to review each month. With the current language in this legislation, these volunteer panels would review every open case that has been open over 120 days which would be approximately 800 cases per month statewide (varying numbers per region). Although these panels would be established under the direction of the public health districts, the Department would be responsible to provide all case records related to these reviews. This is a significant workload increase in terms of the administrative tasks of pulling all case records

that meet the requirements for review, scanning or copying thousands of pages of court records, medical records, safety assessments, and case information and ensuring this information is available for the panels to review each month. In order to not impact other critical work within our Foster Care program, the Department would need additional administrative staff to support the case review efforts for these panels. These additional staff were not included in the fiscal impact statement. The Department currently provides support of one Program Specialist for one day each month to be available to the panel to answer questions or provide context or help for their reviews. We are happy to continue providing this support to the newly established panels, but this would not be sufficient staffing to handle the administrative functions required for the reviews.

Another challenge with reviewing such a large number of open cases is that many factors of the case that the volunteers would be reviewing are in the process of being managed by the multiple decision makers, including law enforcement, prosecutors, public defenders, children's attorneys, the courts, the Department, CASA representatives, Foster Parents, and parents. We may be in the middle of adoption actions, placement decisions, custody actions or other critical child protection decisions that require all information within the case be carefully protected.

The final area of the bill the Department would like to comment on is the establishment of the Legislative Oversight Committee. Currently, the Child Protection program engages with four legislative committees, and we don't believe adding one more is the most efficient and effective approach to managing and implementing policy changes and ongoing operational improvements in the Child Protection System. The Department is in full support of the establishment of an Oversight Committee that would review and guide the Child Protection System in Idaho. We were disappointed when the final bill did not include our recommendations that other critical stakeholders, such as the courts, the Department, CASA, tribes, schools, and law enforcement were not represented on this panel. As I mentioned earlier, Child Protection Systems are one of the most complex and challenging systems to operate because there are multiple stakeholders and decision makers involved in every aspect of a case. Meaningful and long-lasting improvements in this system will require the input, commitment, and changes by many agencies, the Courts, and our Legislative branch to truly impact this system. We hope considerations will be made to make this Oversight Committee a representative panel of the multi-disciplinary experts involved in protecting our children.

Finally, the cost for the Department to implement the provisions of this new legislation are substantially more than what is indicated in the fiscal note. We are concerned that without funding for system changes and without necessary supports available to implement the changes outlined in the legislation, that either the Department will have to compromise work in other critical areas of Child Welfare or we will not be successful in implementing these requirements. We hope further consideration on fiscal impacts will be made to ensure the Department can implement these important changes effectively.

Thank you, madam chair and members of the committee, for allowing us the opportunity to comment on this important piece of legislation.