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February 17, 2022

House Judiciary Committee Testimony in Support with Amendments

HB 561 Child Custody – Cases Involving Child Abuse or Domestic Violence – Training for Judges

Since 1998, the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E) has created awareness of the deep need for adoption competency in mental health services and has grown to become the national leader providing mental health and child welfare professionals with training and coaching to become adoption competent. Our programs help professionals gain the skills, insight, and experience necessary to serve the needs of the adoptive, foster care, and kinship communities. We have been at the forefront of efforts to identify foster and adopted children and families as a population most at-risk for a mental health crisis and have sought to improve the competency of the workforce through specialized training. Our efforts stem from over a decade experience with specialized adoption-competent mental health services to over 7000 clinical clients and on average over 6800 sessions annually.

The Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) is pleased to support with amendments HB 561 Child Custody – Cases Involving Child Abuse or Domestic Violence – Training for Judges.

This bill would develop a training for judges presiding over child custody cases involving child abuse or domestic violence. It requires a judge who hears child custody cases involving child abuse or domestic violence to receive certain child custody training or continued training. We specifically support **section B part 1 and 2** of this bill that states that the training will include brain development of infants and children and the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), trauma, chronic toxic stress on a child's brain development and the ways that a child's response to trauma varies. We would further propose reference in the bill to the existing curriculums for child welfare and mental health professionals that has already been developed by the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative (NTI), a cooperative agreement between the Children's Bureau and C.A.S.E., as a model for this kind of training.

The C.A.S.E. NTI trainings are tailored for both mental health clinicians and child welfare workers. It is a free 20-hour web-based interactive training for child welfare professionals. Module 6 of the child welfare training specifically addresses the Impact of Early and Ongoing Trauma on Child and Family Development, Brain Growth and Development, and Mental Health. Some of the lessons in this module include:

Lesson 1: Traumatic Experiences of Children Achieving Permanence Through Adoption or Guardianship

Lesson 2: Understanding the Psychological Impact of Trauma and How Children and Youth Cope

Lesson 3: The Child Welfare Professional's Role in Working with Children and Youth to Identify and Address the Impact of Trauma

Lesson 4: Child Welfare Professional's Role in Working with Parents to Address the Impact of Trauma

Lesson 5: Child Welfare Professional's Role in Supporting Mental Health Treatment

In a pretest evaluation of Module 6: The Impact of Trauma on Brain Development & Behavior, social workers scored an average of 78% compared to an average of 96% post-test while mental health professionals scored an average of 62% compared to an average of 94% post-test. Consistent knowledge was gained across the board on all modules, most significantly in the grief and loss module – where the average pretest score was 48.4% compared to the post-test score of 95.1%. Other topics that are included in the NTI training are: understanding the need for an adoption competent workforce, understanding mental health needs of the foster and adoptive community, attachment and bonding, race, ethnicity,

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culture, class, and diversity, positive identify formation, and promoting family stability and preservation. All of these topics are crucial in understanding the intricacies of the child abuse and neglect and how to discuss these issues with clients in the child welfare system without retraumatization.

We believe that NTI is an immediate solution for appropriate training for anyone that works in or alongside the child welfare system. For example, C.A.S.E. is also working to develop an NTI training for school-based mental health professionals. Here at C.A.S.E. we understand the profound impact that having an adoption competent workforce has on the children and families we serve. As child welfare professionals and judges ultimately make most of the decisions in a child and family's case while in foster care, it is of the utmost importance that they understand key issues in child abuse and neglect cases especially from a trauma informed lens.

To achieve your goals, we propose that the legislation reference the need for training on adoption competency, in addition to trauma, adverse childhood experiences, and brain development. That change would allow for the Children's Bureau, as part of its implementation of NTI, to build on its existing curriculums for child welfare staff and mental health providers to develop a derivative product specially for judges. These existing curriculums already provide a foundation for a new training curriculum for court personnel that could be used immediately or could be a foundation for development of a new training that could be quickly disseminated – without reinventing the wheel by ignoring the progress already made by NTI.

Maryland has the unique opportunity to appropriately train judges in trauma informed practices to mitigate the impacts of explicit and implicit bias on child custody decisions and to ensure best practices are taken to reduce the risk of traumatizing or retraumatizing a child through the court process. **The Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) urges the Judiciary Committee to pass HB 561- with the suggested amendments of adding an NTI derivative for judges to the bill.**

Please contact CEO Debbie Riley Riley@adoptionsupport.org or Hailey D'Elia at DElia@adoptionsupport.org for more information or to schedule any follow-up discussions.