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January 26, 2017

Senator Amy Sinclair  
Iowa Legislature

Re: Senator McCoy's bill related to Natalie Finn, SF 138

Dear Senator Sinclair:

The tragic death of Natalie Finn is a heart-wrenching reminder that each of us has a responsibility to look out for vulnerable children in our communities.

While looking for a solution to this problem, Senator McCoy has filed a bill, SF 138, that would impose new restrictions on Iowa homeschooling families. It has been assigned to the Senate Education Committee, which you chair.

Senator McCoy's intention in trying to find a way to protect children is commendable. He has missed the mark, however, by focusing on homeschooling instead of on proven methods to prevent child abuse fatalities.

But there *is* a proven way to prevent child abuse fatalities.

In 2012, Congress authorized the creation of the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities (CECANF). The commission was composed of top experts in the field and held meetings and hearings spanning several years in many localities around the nation.

The commission members heard from academics, experts, policymakers, and policy implementers, and collected an exhaustive amount of data on a truly national scale. This was possibly the most ambitious effort ever undertaken to gather credible data, analyze the problem, and craft workable strategies that could apply across our entire nation.

CECANF issued its final report in March 2016 (see link below). The commission's top recommendation to the nation's policymakers was: "Identify children and families most at risk of a maltreatment fatality" (page 13).

The report listed numerous risk factors.

Homeschooling was never listed as a risk factor--or even mentioned.

HOME SCHOOL LEGAL DEFENSE ASSOCIATION

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The commission found that a prior report to social services is the “single strongest predictor of a child’s potential risk for injury death...before age 5” (page 26). According to the data:

--“Given the same risk factors, a child reported to CPS had about a two-and-a-half times greater risk of any injury death.”

--“A child with a prior report of physical abuse had a risk of intentional injury death that was five times greater than a child reported for neglect.”

--“Children with a prior CPS report of physical abuse had an almost six (5.8) times greater risk of death from intentional injuries.”

The report highlighted two localities that successfully reduced child abuse and neglect fatalities after they approached the problem using well-recognized risk factors.

In Hillsborough County, Florida, the community was shocked into action after nine children died of maltreatment between 2009 and 2011. Knowing that a report to social services is the single most important risk factor, agencies in Hillsborough County carefully reviewed open cases and analyzed new cases based on documentable risk factors. Abuse-related deaths dropped to zero (pages 38–41).

In Wichita, Kansas, six young children died from abuse or neglect during the first nine months of 2008. In responding to this intolerable situation, officials looked at data and observed that most deaths came from certain ZIP code areas. The community made a concerted effort to invest additional time, money, resources, and help into those ZIP code areas. Eventually 60 organizations teamed up to focus on those areas. From 2011 through 2013, there were no maltreatment deaths (pages 70–73).

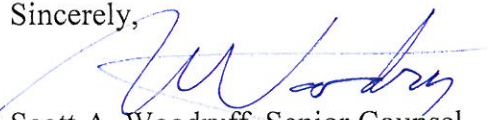
Hillsborough and Wichita show us that there are proven strategies for reducing child abuse and neglect deaths.

If West Des Moines (where Natalie Finn lived) had followed the example of Hillsborough County, officials there might have noticed the numerous abuse-neglect reports related to Natalie’s family, and might have brought additional resources into action. Natalie might be alive today. There is no reason that the state of Iowa as a whole could not adopt one or both of the proven success strategies of Hillsborough or Wichita.

Senator McCoy’s bill completely misses the risk factors identified in the CECANF report, and focuses instead on an issue—homeschooling—that does not warrant even one mention in the report. If enacted, his bill would likely misallocate limited public resources while failing to reduce child abuse and neglect fatalities.

I urge the rejection of Sen. McCoy’s bill. Instead, I urge the committee to read the full CECANF report, take advantage of the tremendous amount of legwork CECANF has already done, give particular attention to the Wichita and Hillsborough County case studies, and guide the state of Iowa to adopt proven strategies for reducing child abuse and neglect fatalities.

Sincerely,



Scott A. Woodruff, Senior Counsel

CECANF report: <https://eliminatechildabusefatalities.sites.usa.gov/files/2016/03/CECANF-final-report.pdf>