

12

## SB844 Foster Parent Bill of Rights

### Testimony

Madam Chair Representative Urban and members of the Select Committee on Children, I am Karen Coton.

I reside in Waterbury, and am here to speak on behalf of SB844 Foster Parent Bill of Rights.

My husband and I became foster parents to help children in need. When we took the 10 week training course we were encouraged by what we heard.

We were told we would be part of a team, reunification was the primary goal, and if the birth parents were unable to complete the necessary steps toward reunification, DCF would then proceed to terminate parental rights upon twelve months.

Last year we adopted our daughter after nearly 4 years of being her foster parents.

Lezlie was placed in our home on the day she was released from the hospital after her birth, she was just one month. She spent her first month undergoing detox treatments; she was born addicted to several drugs.

At the time my husband and I had no thoughts of adopting her. I sincerely believed her mother would do everything in her power to get her back. I remember the head nurse at the hospital told me that was not going to happen, her mother would never "get it together."

The years and months up to her adoption were led by confusion, frustration, hopelessness, hopefulness, sorrow and joy, as several reunification dates were set and failed.

We were never given any notice of court dates; we knew a court date was coming because her birth mother would make a few consecutive visits.

I had a bag packed in her room because I never knew if she was going to suddenly leave us.

There were incidents at several visits; when Lezlie was seven months old her birth mother sent a separate diaper bag home with her. When I searched the bag I found a needle.

When Lezlie was 18 months old, on a chilly wet October day, her mother was not happy with the shoes I had on her feet and cut them up. She came home completely barefoot on a 40 degree day.

At that time the visits were unsupervised at her home for two hours, a short time later they were increased to three hours.

My husband and I did not understand how her mother could be rewarded for her apparent poor behavior and we were told it is part of the process and everything is up to the judges.

During this time my husband and I started attending the monthly support group meetings at our local office.

We were glad to find we were not alone in our confusion, and frustration, many parents were in similar situations; children, most of them babies, in their homes for over a year, little information being given, confusion about the whole process and a strong fear of retaliation by speaking up or asking too many questions.

We were told during our initial training, that in order to improve the system we need to do it through legislation. It was apparent to me foster parents deserve to be heard, respected and treated as part of the team. We do this to help the children.

When I ask other foster parents to support this bill I am often confronted with the same question, "aren't you afraid of retaliation."

When I first submitted this bill last year to Senator Crisco's office I was told I could do so anonymously. I refused.

It is my hope this bill will help to build communication between caseworkers and foster parents. I also hope we can work together to improve the system and help our children and remove the fear of retaliation.