



## Testimony in Support of HB4781

Submitted by Ashley Akerman on behalf of Brightpoint

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Good afternoon. My name is Ashley Akerman, and I manage caregiver and parent support programs statewide at Brightpoint. Thank you to Chairwoman Costa Howard, Vice Chair Du Buclet, Minority Spokesperson Reick, and the rest of the House Adoption & Child Welfare Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important piece of legislation.

You may be more familiar with our prior name, Children's Home & Aid. Our new name, Brightpoint, signals our unwavering commitment to disrupt the systemic and multi-generational cycle of racial, social, and economic inequality by investing in families. This new identity is a recommitment to our partnership with families as the single greatest asset for child and youth well-being. This is because at Brightpoint, we believe that strong families create thriving children.

HB4781 makes critical changes to the child welfare system in Illinois by prioritizing children's and youth's connections to their families and communities of origin. We strongly support this legislation because research shows placing youth with relatives or kin lessens the trauma of family separation, reduces the number of times a child is moved, and enhances permanency options. Kinship care offers strong connections to a child's cultural identity and safeguards opportunities for support within their family and community. Kinship placements result in higher placement satisfaction for youth in care, and create better social, behavioral, mental health, and educational outcomes for youth than when they are placed in non-kin foster care.

I want to highlight several sections of this legislation that could have a transformational impact on the child welfare system in Illinois.

### **Increased Payments Regardless of Licensure Status**

This legislation would ensure caregivers are properly compensated for taking care of kin, regardless of their licensure status. Currently, licensed foster homes can receive anywhere from \$672 to \$827 per child per month depending on the age of the child whereas unlicensed relative caregivers are only paid a flat rate of \$479 per child per month in their care. **Additionally, kinship caregivers are more likely to be**





**living in poverty and have less access to resources and social supports than non-relative placements.** Traditional, non-relative placements have often had time to plan for an additional child financially, find child care, and have support networks built in place to help them as they foster. Relative/kin caregivers are often receiving placement of a child in a time of crisis and can't similarly prepare for the additional expenses. Children cost the same to care for regardless of whether their caregiver is licensed, and this bill reflects that reality by ensuring non-licensed relative caregivers are paid at least 90 percent of the licensed rate.

### **Reducing Barriers**

As one of the larger providers of child welfare services in Illinois, we know the barriers kin face to being an option for placement. Many relatives and kin are approached about placement during a crisis for a family member and are forced to navigate a system they know nothing about. They may not fully understand how long a child could be in care or how a case proceeds through the system. Relatives and kin are encouraged to seek licensure as a caregiver because they can receive additional payments for being a licensed placement. However, there are often barriers that prevent them from becoming licensed. Sometimes the barriers are related to a prior criminal issue that is acceptable for placement of a child but isn't approved for licensure. Other times it's related to space limitations in their home or purchasing safety items such as smoke detectors. Becoming licensed can feel for families like a deeper intrusion and relatives don't want to feel like they are being policed by the very system that has brought trauma to their family.

Families who are non-native English speakers also experience unique barriers to becoming licensed. Rosemary, a Brightpoint bilingual Caregiver Support Specialist in the Rockford area stated, "Caregivers have expressed how an immediate orientation and educational experience in their native language would have been beneficial and equitable in their caregiver journey. There are many Spanish-speaking families who are willing to put in the work and take on the responsibility of being caregivers; there's just too many barriers to make this possible. Providing a streamlined certification process is critical to allow for relative caregivers to continue to care for their kin." HB4781 makes several accommodations to the licensure process for relatives and kin by creating a separate licensure track, which aligns criminal background check requirements with national standards, and removes other barriers to make it easier for relatives and kin to become licensed.





### **Kinship Navigator Program**

HB4781 would require DCFS to create a kinship navigator program for the State. This has already been prioritized by the Governor in his budget address. Relatives and kin require unique support compared to traditional non-relative foster placements. They are often navigating family dynamics and their own reactions to having a family member involved with the child welfare system. A kinship navigator program can provide referrals to additional services, training and education tailored to kin, and provide connections to support groups. Creating a stable, more permanent placement for children requires concrete wrap-around supports for the placement family.

Through the kin-first approach advanced in this legislation, children in substitute care will be better supported in maintaining connections to family and culture, reducing the trauma due to interactions with the child welfare system overall. Thank you for your time in attention to this matter. Should you have any additional questions, I can be reached at [aakerman@brightpoint.org](mailto:aakerman@brightpoint.org).