

**REMARKS
BISHOP GRIFFIN BREAKFAST
U.S. SENATOR MIKE DEWINE
COLUMBUS, OH
MAY 7, 2001**

Let me begin by thanking Bishop Griffin for allowing me to join him today, as we discuss an issue that is so important and so pressing in our society today -- and that issue, as you know, is foster care. I thank him for his remarks and the insight and vision and compassion with which he approaches this issue and all children's concerns.

Before I begin my remarks, I also must thank Catholic Social Services and the Renaissance League. I would like to thank Linda Kemp and Kathy Darcy -- who are with us today representing the Renaissance League -- for hosting this breakfast and for all the good work and community service that the League provides to Columbus and the surrounding area. I also would like to thank Mark Huddy, the Bishop's Vicar for Catholic Charities and Social Concerns. He has been most helpful in working with my office to coordinate our discussion today. Thank you, Mark.

Finally, I want to thank our moderator and emcee, Gail Hogan; as well as Monsignor Stephan Moloney for his thoughtful and reflective invocation this morning.

"Let the children come to me" -- what a perfect theme for our discussion about foster care and adoption! Every child in our nation deserves to have the opportunity to come to God through the love and faith they get from their families. Sadly, not all children have this chance. Such children are everywhere, but we find that they are more concentrated in certain places, like the foster care system. Right now, there are more than 21,000 Ohio children in foster care. Nationwide, a half-million children go to bed each night in homes that are not their own.

Every one of these children is "at risk" -- and every single one of them -- whether it's a child here in Columbus, or in Cincinnati, or in Cleveland, or anywhere else in Ohio or America -- deserves to live in a safe, stable, loving, and permanent home -- with loving and caring adults. All children deserve no less. Unfortunately, many -- too many -- children are not getting what they deserve.

While many of the children who spend time in foster care are eventually able to return to stable lives with their families, many of these children end up spending their most important, formative years in the limbo -- a limbo that denies them their chance to be adopted -- a limbo that denies them what all children should have -- and that is a family and a permanent home.

Every day, we get more and more compelling evidence of the need to rescue children from the limbo of the foster care system. Let me tell you about a girl named "Sarah." She is, ultimately, one of the lucky ones, because she has been rescued from a lifetime in foster care. But, until she was placed in a permanent home, this is what happened to

her.

Sarah was born in August of 1993. In December of that year, she was hospitalized in critical condition, suffering from shaken baby syndrome. When she was released from the hospital, she went to her first foster home. From there her life was a succession of foster homes. She had lived in eight foster homes by the time she was only four-years-old. Only one time during this period did she return to her mother's custody -- and then, it was only for a three-month period.

As a result of injuries she suffered during her multiple stays in foster care, Sarah is physically and mentally delayed. She is learning sign language in order to communicate. When she feels frustrated at others' inability to understand her, she bites herself and screams.

Although she was in foster care for over three years, her biological parents made no progress in the child welfare case plan. The juvenile court had, on two occasions, denied the motion of children's services to terminate parental rights. The court's order stated the belief that her mother was immature and ordered Sarah to be placed in long-term foster care, presumably with the belief that the mother would mature with the passage of time. That didn't happen. Eventually, her parents disappeared, altogether.

As a result of the multiple moves and feelings of abandonment, Sarah would become hysterical whenever she saw a full, black garbage bag. You see, Sarah believed that a garbage bag meant she was going to be moved again. Her suitcase had always been a simple, black garbage

I am happy to say that Sarah's foster care odyssey is finally over. Her mother voluntarily relinquished her parental rights, and Sarah is now living with a family who wants to adopt her.

Sadly, Sarah's story is not isolated. Far too many children move from foster home to foster home to foster home. I learned this-- first-hand -- thirty years ago in the early 1970s when I was serving as an assistant county prosecutor in Greene County. One of my duties was to represent the Greene County Children Services in cases where children were going to be removed from their parents' custody. I witnessed then that too many of these cases drag on endlessly, leaving children trapped in temporary foster care placements, which often entail multiple moves from foster home to foster home to foster home -- for years and years and years.

This kind of entrenchment in the system is its own kind of child abuse. Sarah and the thousands of others just like her are the victims of abuse at the hands of the "system." And I, for one, see that as a major social problem.

We ask social services and social workers to try and put all the broken pieces of society back together again, but the social workers are underpaid and overworked. When I was working in the prosecutor's office in Greene County, I worked closely with these

dedicated, hard-working, social welfare professionals.

I have great respect for them. I admire them. They are at the front line of our efforts to save children. Yet, we expect the impossible from them. And frankly, we don't give them all the tools and resources they need to do their jobs.

That is what led me to seek passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, which became law in 1997. Because of this law, we succeeded in changing a prior federal statute that was forcing many children to go back into homes where they were abused and tortured. Because of the law, we've seen a 30 percent increase in the number of adoptions. Because of that law -- kids are safer today.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act represented a significant change in child welfare laws. Perhaps more important, we were changing the way judges and child advocates looked at child welfare cases. This represented a change in the culture of child welfare, as we know it.

We all knew this law was not a quick nor a complete fix -- more work would be necessary to implement a new way of thinking about child welfare -- a way of thinking that says that it is no longer acceptable to place a child in long-term foster care without a plan for permanent placement. We knew that a law that simply tells judges that the health and safety of children must be paramount would not necessarily mean that they would adopt that philosophy in their decisions. To get there, training needs to be available so the law effectively becomes a part of a judge's decision making process.

We also knew that the 1997 law's imposition of reduced timelines would create additional pressure on an already overburdened court system. These timelines, however, are very important to the welfare of the children involved. Foster care, after all, was meant to be a temporary solution -- not a way of life.

To help increase the effectiveness of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, last year I introduced the "Strengthening Abuse and Neglect Courts Act" -- which is also now law. This new law invests in computerized case tracking systems and programs to reduce pending backlogs of abuse and neglect cases. The law also allows judges, attorneys, and court personnel to qualify for existing training programs and would expand the CASA program to underserved and urban areas, so that more children are able to benefit from its services.

Because of courts that are bogged down with so many cases and courts where judges and court personnel have not received adequate training, we are sending far too many children back to dangerous and abusive homes to live with parents who are parents in name only -- homes that are homes in name only. Too often, we send these children back to the custody of people who have already abused and tortured them -- to be abused, beaten, and many times killed.

Judges and court personnel are making tough, life-changing decisions for all parties involved. Given that, we have a responsibility to make sure they are trained properly

and feel confident about those decisions. We also have a responsibility to make sure the courts have a manageable case load, so an appropriate decision can be made in every case after all of the facts have been heard. We cannot rush decision making in these cases -- a child's life is at risk.

With these two laws, we are definitely making some progress. We are seeing sizeable increases in adoptions, we are protecting children, and we are making adoption an issue in the public sphere. People are recognizing that -- and the government is finally recognizing that also. The fact is that if federal dollars are targeted primarily at foster care, children will end up IN foster care. But, if those same dollars and those same efforts are targeted at adoption, more children will end up in permanent homes.

That being said, however, we must recognize that federal laws are not a panacea. We cannot solve all of the problems facing social services and social workers with just two strokes of a pen. We need community involvement. We need the kinds of efforts that Bishop Griffin spoke about -- the very things that Catholic Social Services is doing here in Columbus.

Other private efforts are making huge impacts in the lives of children at-risk. For example, Dave Thomas, himself an adoptee and one of this nation's leading proponents of adoption, has established the Dave Thomas Foundation. This organization is devoted to raising awareness of the thousands of children whose parental rights have been terminated, yet still languish in foster care. The Foundation has funded such worthwhile and innovative programs as the adoption posters and tray liners in Wendy's restaurants, which have featured kids from all 50 states who are available for adoption. Because of his efforts, children are getting out of foster care for good.

As the Bishop so appropriately explained, adoption and permanency is about bringing children to God by bringing children into homes and families where they will receive love and nurturing and faith and spiritual affirmation.

The idea of bringing children to God is about optimism -- and I am optimistic about the future. We have to be optimistic for the sake of all children. I have hope and faith that children will be brought to God if they have the chance -- the opportunity -- to live in families filled with love and care and hope.

The problem of finding permanent and loving homes for children is not insurmountable. Government, private industry, and non-profit agencies -- working together -- can create incentives to adopt and find these children the permanency and the love they so deserve.

Let me conclude by reaffirming the goal of the Adoption and Safe Families Act. And, that goal is to move children from abusive parent and foster care into permanent homes -- safe, stable, loving, and permanent adoptive homes. With faith and love, we can get there. We can bring the children to God and ultimately give them future lives filled with hope and happiness.