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Chair

Ms. Candice Hoepfner

Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Ms. Candice Hoepfner (Portage—Lisgar, CPC)): We're going to call our meeting to order, meeting number 45 of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development, and the Status of Persons With Disabilities, further to our study on federal support measures for adoptive parents.

Today is our last hour session hearing from witnesses on the adoption study. We're very pleased to have with us four young adults—you're all over the age of 18, I understand—who are here to share with us their experiences and their stories. I want to thank you all for being here. We look forward to hearing from you.

Each of you will have about five minutes to present, and then there might be some questions from the committee members. So you have about five minutes, but I'm going to give the witnesses some leeway because probably we want to hear their stories.

We'll begin with Miranda Eggertson.

Yes.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott (Saskatoon—Wanuskewin, CPC): On a point of order, as we have these bios here, I wonder...Lisa Davis, who apparently was not able to make it—

The Chair: Lisa's right here.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: I'm sorry, which was the one...?

The Chair: Judy.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Okay. Then we probably want to note that in particular, insofar as she's not able to explain her situation, and I think we'll all want to take note of Judy's bio as well.

The Chair: For sure. Thank you, Mr. Vellacott.

All right. We'll begin with Miranda, and then we'll go on to Alisha Bowie, Lisa Davis, and Jon Daly.

We'll begin with you, Miranda.

Ms. Miranda Eggertson (As an Individual): Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to talk to you.

My name is Miranda Eggertson. I am a 20-year-old young mom and student at the Youville Centre here in Ottawa. I have two daughters, Allysia, who is 16 months, and Alexis, who is four months. I was adopted when I was eight. I was in foster care in Kenora, Ontario, off and on from the time I was 15 months old, until

I was four. I was back and forth to my birth parents from four until eight; I was permanently in foster care. I had about ten moves from one home to another until I was adopted.

When I was in foster care, I felt like I was alone. I felt like people didn't want me. I never knew how long I would be staying anywhere. I remember watching other kids with their parents. I missed my parents and wondered why I couldn't live with them and why I couldn't have that kind of bond that other kids seemed to have with their families. I felt like I couldn't trust my foster family. I didn't want to get close because I was scared I was going to get moved again.

A lot of things happened to me in foster care that shouldn't happen to any kid. When my social worker told me she found a forever mom for me, I was happy, but I was also scared because I was leaving my birth mom behind, and my other siblings. My new mom was a single journalist from Ottawa. When I met her, I asked her why she wanted to adopt me and not a baby. She told me she liked babies, but she'd seen my picture on the Canada's Waiting Children list and she wanted to adopt me. I asked her why she wanted to adopt me since I had brown skin. I was very confused about that. I had to make sure she wanted me and she wasn't crazy.

I was happy about being adopted, but at the same time I was really confused. Growing up in Ottawa, it was kind of hard because most other kids didn't understand adoption. I got teased a lot because I had a white single mom, and I had a lot of anger about having to leave my birth family, because I remembered them. I had a lot of flashbacks when I was younger. I was angry about things that happened to me when I was younger, before I got adopted.

When I was 16, I took off on my own for a bit to figure things out. I went back to my reserve and I met my birth mom, my half brothers, my aunts and uncles and cousins and extended family. I did a lot of self-destructive things, but I also knew that I could always call my mom for help. That's why I think older kids should get adopted instead of aging out of the foster home care system without a family.

Everybody always needs someone who will stand behind them. When I spent some time on the street, I met a lot of kids who were homeless who had been in foster care. They didn't have anybody they could call if anything went wrong or if anything bothered them, except their drug dealers.

My life now is more secure. I have a loving family, loving support system, an adoptive family, my partner, my biological family. I am going to a great school that helps me. I have my own place, and I hope to go to college next year. If I hadn't been adopted, I probably wouldn't have aged out of the system. I probably still would be into drugs and wouldn't have a plan for my future. I probably wouldn't have my daughters. I might have ended up like my two half sisters. My older sister died working the streets of Thunder Bay, and my next sister hung herself when she heard about my older sister's death.

Some people think aboriginal kids shouldn't get adopted by white families, but I think a good family is what matters, no matter what colour, size, or sexual orientation they are. Everyone deserves a permanent family, a go-to person who will always be there.

I hope this committee can help support adoption so that more kids like me can get adopted.

Thank you.

• (1110)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Miranda.

We'll go onto Alisha, please.

Ms. Alisha Bowie (As an Individual): Hi. My name is Alisha. Currently, I go to Carleton University. I'm in my third year, studying human rights. I came into care at the age of 10, with my six other siblings. I'm the oldest. Now there are nine of us, actually, but that's a different story.

Basically, I moved into a foster home and I lived with them for eight years, until I was 18. Essentially, it was the same foster home, but I didn't feel a part of that home. Some of my siblings were adopted. There's just one other who wasn't. Essentially, I saw them in a different way. They had this loving family they could turn to, and I didn't have that. I didn't really feel like I belonged in that foster home. I also had a foster sister who was the same age as me, and I felt she was treated differently from me.

I'm currently aging out of the foster system. I turn 21 in August. Right now, I live on my own, and it's really difficult not having someone you can turn to. I don't know who to call when I'm in crisis or something. I turn to my worker, but I won't have her for very long. It's also difficult because I'm separated from my siblings.

As I said, they were adopted, and I'm not able to see them as often. And that's their family; I'm just someone who was their biological sister. It's kind of different. I see them having all these opportunities, and I never got that. They have someone to go home to on holidays.

When I do go back to my old foster home, it's almost like I'm a guest in that home, and I don't know where I belong. There are other foster kids who are now living in my room. It's just difficult. I just don't know where I belong. That's my story.

The Chair: Thanks very much, Alisha.

Lisa.

Ms. Lisa Davis (As an Individual): Everyone suffers, at some point in their lives, loss, disappointment, and heartbreak. For youth in care, it's not a matter of when they will suffer this, it's a guarantee that they will know loss, disappointment, and heartbreak more than anything else.

Permanency equals a sense of belonging. When it comes to permanency for youth in care, there's one simple fact: it's a basic human need that everyone should be entitled to. We should all know where we go at Christmas. We should all know where we go on our university breaks.

I was a foster child from the age of three. I did age out of the system. I'm now 32 years old, and I'm finally in university, of my own choice, not because of any support I ever had. When I was 20 years old, it was my last-shot opportunity to take advantage of any educational opportunities while still getting some support from the Children's Aid Society. I became a cosmetician, which left me in a low-end job with not very much security. Having a young family, that was very much a struggle, but I continued to volunteer and work very hard and build myself up so I could go to university. But I do it all on my own. So when it's a matter of trying to make a phone call to figure out what I should be doing with my very ill-tempered three-year-old, it's hard to know who to turn to. It's hard to know that sense of belonging.

I did have a permanent foster home, or at least what I thought was permanent. I was promised permanency and I was supposed to be adopted as a teenager. My foster dad died when I was 19. He never adopted me because he was in the midst of retirement and there wasn't enough support for him to adopt me. So when I was 19 and had a small child, all of a sudden I was left absolutely alone. The family that I thought I had, for many years, turned their back. I was just the foster child. There was no legal binding support for me. I even carried the name of my foster family, so that made it even harder when they turned their backs. This whole culture I'd grown up with and learned to enjoy was something that I no longer had. I had to make my own.

Nobody should ever have to not have that sense of belonging.

We come into the system and it's not our choice. We don't choose to be abused. We don't choose to be hit. We don't choose to be sexually assaulted. When there comes an opportunity to offer these children, like me and Alisha and Jon and Miranda, some permanency and stability in our lives, when nothing has ever been stable, it's an opportunity that means we are able to give back, instead of continuing to be in a system that will have to support us for many years.

There are many youth in care who are not as lucky as we are to be in university or to have opportunities to have somebody to call. Many of these kids end up on the streets. Many of them end up filling our jails. The percentage is absolutely humongous. The burden on the system is absolutely huge when you consider permanency would mean there'd be an attachment and a bond with somebody who has agreed to support you. I imagine many sitting at the table here today have had that opportunity to call their parents when they needed them, when they were struggling with something. Those are opportunities that we don't have, and it's something we would really like to have.

Thank you.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Jon, we'll go to you now. Thank you.

Mr. Jon Daly (As an Individual): My name is Jonathan Daly. I've been in and out of care pretty much my whole life. I first entered care when I was three years old, with my two younger sisters. After being bounced around to two or three homes, I went back to live with mom when I was five. When I was nine years old, a tragic car accident took my two sisters, my mother, and stepfather away from me. From that point on, I entered foster care permanently. Between the ages of 9 and 11, I went between three foster homes. I got to see a lot; I got to experience a lot, a lot of different religions, different cultures, and different parental methods. It was very difficult for me because in two years, going to three homes, that's an average of about eight months per home. It's very difficult to get used to how the kids are raised, how I'm supposed to act, the religions. So it took its toll on me. I had quite a difficult childhood.

When I was 11 years old I came into my permanent foster home, with André Fontaine. I've been living there ever since. I'm 21 years old now. It's been about 10 years this March. Five years after I moved in with him, I got adopted. Before I got adopted, and even after I got adopted, it wasn't easy. I was a teenager, so I had my share of troubles, but knowing I had this support system, it really helped me get through all of it. One of the biggest fears I ever had growing up, that no kid should ever have, is the fear of having to leave a family. It's really one of the worst things you can imagine. You make friends, they really become your family, your everything, and to have to leave that behind....

So being adopted for me was one of the biggest weights ever lifted off my shoulders. I have someone there that I can always go home to or always call on for help, whether it's to do laundry or to file taxes or to help me learn to cook or help me apply to school, whatever the situation. I always have André I can call on, and his partner Darcy.

I owe pretty much everything I have to that support system being there and to him being there, the social work I had as well, and all the support and love they were able to give to me, even with my troubled growing up.

Now I'm in school. I'm at Algonquin—a four-year program—and I love it. I have so much to look forward to, and I really owe it all to both Children's Aid and to André for giving me that forever home and that sense of belonging.

Thank you.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you all very much for sharing your stories with us.

Typically, what we do now is we go around the committee table and the committee members have a chance to ask you some questions. Usually we have some time limits on that, too.

We'll probably do a seven-minute round, so that will be the questions and answer time period.

Mr. Savage, you wanted to begin.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I want to thank you very much, Miranda and Alisha and Lisa and Jon, for coming here today.

It might be a little bit daunting to think you're coming before a parliamentary committee, or maybe it's not. It would have been for me at the age of 20 or 21 or 32, or if I ever get to be 50. It's always a bit of a challenge, but I'm going to tell you, you've brought forward your messages very clearly and very effectively today, and I thank you for that.

We've been studying this issue for some time, and it's been very interesting. It's taken us in a lot of directions.

Clearly, you four are the face of adoption. You are the best spokespeople, in many ways, for adoption and the difference it can make in the lives of people. Many of us take a family for granted. We've had that in place when we're born, and we have it through all of our childhood years, certainly in my case.

I think it was you, Alisha, perhaps, who mentioned your not having somebody to go to when you have a personal crisis of some kind. Now, in my case, my father was a great man. He was involved in many, many things, but it was my mother I used to seek out for a cup of tea. So you bring a powerful message.

Miranda, you spoke about your sisters, one of whom hanged herself, one of whom died on the streets. What would have happened to you if you had not been adopted, do you think?

Ms. Miranda Eggertson: I think I'd probably be the same way. My parents are alcoholics, so we probably would have been by ourselves and.... It's a really hard subject; sorry.

Mr. Michael Savage: So perhaps the difference between somebody who meets a tragic end at a young age and somebody who's connected with their family again and going on to post-secondary education is being adopted and being part of a family?

Ms. Miranda Eggertson: Yes.

Mr. Michael Savage: That's very impressive.

I want to ask any one of you...I'm not sure if you've had a chance to look at any of the testimony we've heard, but we've had a number of recommendations from a number of organizations and a number of individuals, and from a number of people who were adopted and/or have adopted. Have any of you had a chance to look at any of the testimony, and would you have any specific recommendations to this committee on how we would make adoption better in Canada?

Ms. Lisa Davis: I can speak to that.

Again, as I said, I think people not having permanency in their lives causes a lot more strain on our public system than anything else. Having connections and attachment somewhere that you can rely on, that's going to take the pressure off so much of the system.

Things like expanding EI opportunities.... Maybe they don't have to specifically recover from physically having a child, but that mother who has carried a baby in her womb has had that time to connect with her child and the partner has had time to connect through the outside and through hearing that voice.

Longer times to connect, that little bit of extra time invested, will make for a huge difference down the road and fewer missed opportunities. Again, creating attachment connection is incredibly important. I think practical supports like increasing EI times for adoptive parents are crucial.

The other thing I find very important is that children do not have the same rights across this country. A child from zero to 18 is not guaranteed the same rights from province to province, because it is a provincial thing, and I understand it will remain a provincial thing. However, I truly believe the federal government can step up and say this is what we believe should be the national benchmark, that every child should be able to have this standard, just like the Convention on the Rights of the Child, that every child is supposed to be guaranteed a certain number of rights. Having the federal government say we believe in permanency for children means that when advocates such as ourselves talk to our provincial government, we can say you need to step up to the national standard. I think that's crucial.

• (1125)

Mr. Michael Savage: This shows the many faces of adoption.

Jon, it tells us here that you had two dads. Is that right?

Mr. Jon Daly: Yes, I grew up with my two adoptive parents, André Fontaine and Darcy MacPherson.

Mr. Michael Savage: My godchild has two mums. We have aboriginal children but non-aboriginal parents. As you mentioned, you experienced many different religions. This is the very dynamic situation of adoption, and it affects so many Canadians.

I want to thank you very much for coming today. It was very helpful.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

If it's all right, I might just follow up, because you had a minute left.

Lisa, could you expand a little on the differences in the provinces, the different standards? We've heard some testimony before about having some communication between provinces, but I didn't realize—maybe the other committee members knew. What are some of the different benchmarks in the different provinces?

Ms. Lisa Davis: The ages where children are in care is one big issue that could be a federal benchmark.

But for adoption, specifically, I know for instance here in Ottawa...Gatineau is very close, it's right next door, but if you want to adopt a child in Ottawa and you live in Gatineau, you work in Ottawa, and your life takes place in Ottawa, that's considered an international adoption. You then have to pay for your own home study, and it's not—

The Chair: International?

Ms. Lisa Davis: It's an international adoption.

The Chair: Because of Quebec, it's an international...?

Ms. Lisa Davis: Yes. That is one thing that is a huge barrier. There are children who need to be adopted, and it shouldn't matter what province you come from. There shouldn't be those types of

barriers. But Quebec is specifically different in that way, where you would have to pay for your own home study and all of that.

The Chair: I think that is news to all of us.

I'll go to the next person.

Madam Beaudin.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Welcome to you all.

[*English*]

The Chair: Let's make sure that everyone has their translation on.

We'll just pause for a moment and the clerk will make sure that everybody has the right channel and the volume.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: In your lives, you have shown a great deal of resilience, and that does you honour; I applaud you. It is clear to see that you have become three accomplished young women and one accomplished young man with plans, and, above all, with dreams. In my mind, that is what really counts.

I have a question for Alisha, just to make sure I understood. You make a distinction between being in a foster family and the time when you could be adopted. Did I understand your situation correctly, Alisha? Am I right that you were in foster care for eight years? I seem to be hearing you say that you no longer have any contact with that foster family? Have I got your life story right?

[*English*]

Ms. Alisha Bowie: I think I understood that question.

I was in a foster home for eight years, so I was drawing that distinction between adoption and foster care. I didn't have that permanent family. If I had had an adoptive family, maybe things would have been different and I would have someone I could go and talk to for certain things, and I'd feel like I belonged somewhere and that I meant something to someone.

• (1130)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: So you no longer have any contact with your foster family?

[*English*]

Ms. Alisha Bowie: No.

I go back once in a while to see my foster family. I have more contact with my foster sister because she is the same age as me, so we've kind of grown up together and we're almost like friends. So sometimes I see them, but as I mentioned, it's a different scenario when I go there. She's actually specifically said that I am a guest in her home. And you know, you don't want to feel like a guest with someone you've lived with for eight years of your life. That's just not what it is. They were my family almost, and to have them say you don't belong there anymore, it really hurts.

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: I understand. You are essentially becoming a support and an example for other children who have to live through situations like you did.

We have met with a lot of witnesses who have talked to us about steps that could be taken to help the parents. You lived through the situation as children. My question goes to all four of you.

What would you like to change in life as you have led it? Having seen adoption from the inside, what in your experience as adopted children would you like to change?

[English]

Ms. Lisa Davis: Thank you very much for that question.

For me personally, because my foster dad was in the midst of retiring, it was a huge financial strain all of a sudden. He wasn't expecting the retirement. It was more of a forced situation, which left him in a position financially where he couldn't adopt me. So to see even a portion of the support that's offered to foster parents go to adoptive parents, at least to allow them that adjustment period, would have been a large support. That would have meant that at 19, when I wanted one family heirloom—I wanted just a connection with that family who had been there my whole life—it wouldn't have been taken from me.

What Alisha said is incredibly powerful: “almost family”. Why should we ever have to say “almost family”? We should have a family. That's just it. We are social beings who deserve to have that. We have to remember as a society that sometimes the dollars and cents.... At the end of the day, it's to spend that time with our family, to be connected to somebody. We shouldn't have an “almost family”. If there's power to somehow change that so people can have “forever family” and have somewhere to go to for support....

[Translation]

Mrs. Josée Beaudin: Thank you.

I have a quick question. What made it work in your case? How do you explain the fact that you have become young adults with dreams and with plans?

[English]

Ms. Lisa Davis: I can tell you it's been a lot of struggle. Again, I'm 32 and I sit in a classroom with many 19-year-olds who have many family supports or other 19- or 20-year-olds who don't. I'm 32. I'm up against a lot of people who do have the support to be in university, but for me, it's a lot of struggle. I have to work. I have to volunteer. I have to care for my children. So something is lacking sometimes. I don't spend as much time with my children as I wish I could. I do it because I have to. I have to get ahead and I have to be able to help other people in similar situations. But some of us don't have the fortitude to do that. Some of us need that time.

We've gone through a lot of things in our lives. For me personally, it was sexual and physical abuse. To have time to actually just be present in my own life would be a huge support, a huge help. There's a lot of healing time that we miss out on. How did we come this way? We're a very resilient people. Some of us are willing to get up and fight every day, but there are some people who are not. Again, I

bring you back to our prison systems and our streets when we're talking, where 70% or more of those people didn't have families.

• (1135)

The Chair: Mr. Martin.

Mr. Tony Martin (Sault Ste. Marie, NDP): Thank you for coming today. I know it takes a lot of courage to come before a committee such as this and tell your story—so very personal, the intimate details about yourself. I just want to say that we appreciate you doing that and coming forward, because when you do, we learn here, and hopefully we can together make recommendations to the government that will create a situation that will make it possible for more young people to have forever families.

We've heard a lot of recommendations. We heard here this morning how employment insurance could be extended to make it more possible.... The challenge seems to be, in many instances, a question of resources, of being able to afford another child and all that comes with that, of being able to somehow afford the support and training needed to actually do it effectively. People asked for that—families who came, foster parents who came—and they said if they just had access to more training, they'd be able to do it better and therefore be willing to do it more often, and all that.

Jon, you mentioned that you had a troubled adolescence. Were there things missing in the community, the bigger context, that could have been there to make possible for you to...? Yes, all kids get into trouble, but maybe not go so deeply into it, and maybe participate in a more constructive way in the community, and in that way have support for your adoptive family to.... They have a piece they need to do, but the community has a piece that it needs to do.

Were there things missing in the community that we could recommend or suggest here that would be helpful in terms of the whole adoption scenario?

Mr. Jon Daly: In the community, I can't think of too much. I know one of the things that really led me down that path was moving around to all these different families and not getting the help I needed. No one really checked in with me.

The first foster home I went to after the accident was Jehovah's Witness, so I was not allowed to go to therapy. And Children's Aid never really forced that on me. It seems almost obvious that it should have been forced after what I went through, and not just with the accident; there was all types of abuse going on prior to that with my mom's boyfriend.

Now that I think back, that CAS didn't mandate that I should be sent to therapy is kind of shocking. I think a lot of the troubles I ran into are associated with all those issues that were never really dealt with.

Mr. Tony Martin: You're saying, first of all, if you had been mandated to go.... The other question is that sometimes in my own community, when somebody is diagnosed as needing therapy, finding a therapist, being able to afford the therapist, and all that kind of thing, becomes an issue as well.

Miranda, in terms of your situation, I am wondering how important it is to you now to be somewhat rooted in your story, your culture, your history, your people. Is that an important issue for you?

Ms. Miranda Eggertson: Oh, yes, it's really important to me.

Mr. Tony Martin: What are you able to do to actually connect to that?

Ms. Miranda Eggertson: When I went back to my reserve, I felt more connected to my background. In Ottawa, I know there are communities and community centres and everything, but I don't know.... It was hard when I was in my adoptive family. It was hard to go there with my adoptive mother. I don't know how to explain.

● (1140)

Mr. Tony Martin: But it was important to you to have that connection, to understand your story, where you came from, in terms of being all that you want to be.

Ms. Miranda Eggertson: Yes, it still is important. And I want it to be important to my kids, too.

Mr. Tony Martin: That's all I have. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I have a follow-up question, if it's okay with you, Mr. Martin. There are a couple of minutes left.

You alluded to a basic human right to have a forever family. We've talked about this in committee, the basic human rights for shelter and food, but I don't think we've really ever heard that. We know it, but we haven't heard it articulated that way.

I wonder if one of you could comment on that. I mean, foster parents provide you with food and shelter, but I think we're hearing about this basic human right to have a forever family. Maybe that's where, if I'm hearing you, we have neglected to help guarantee that.

Would you say that's something we've forgotten about in government?

Ms. Lisa Davis: I think that's absolutely true. We have signed on to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that is something that's national; it does guarantee certain rights to children.

Again, somebody else mentioned this idea of taking family for granted. I think sometimes it's so easy to forget, when so many people do have families, what we would give to have some of those family spats and quarrels that people talk about as normal.

That's the thing. We don't even have the right to have what's normal, what everybody else takes for granted. Maybe that's why it is abandoned as a right to have that sense of belonging and somebody to go to.

I do feel you articulated that well. It is something that has not been really addressed by government, that it is a basic right.

Food and shelter are wonderful, but you can get that in jail too. You can get that through begging. You can get that just about anywhere. However, children don't get the ability to choose certain things. That's where it takes people, such as you, who do have the power to make sure that when we don't have the choice, we're protected, that we have somebody looking out for us.

I do believe that is our government's responsibility.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Watson.

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for appearing, for your compelling testimony, and your courage as well. I've only ever talked about the fact that I'm adopted. I've never really talked about the circumstances of my adoption publicly before, so I appreciate that you have come and laid an awful lot out on the table.

My own experience is I was adopted as an infant, so I didn't have to navigate, if you will, the child welfare system. So I don't have the experiences that some of you do. Notwithstanding that, adoption is still difficult. I could say that turning 40 next month, I'm still in counselling for issues that stem back to my adoption and other things like that—although I can say I'm making progress too, so there's hope. I appreciate that you've been able to share that.

I probably have about two hours' worth of questions. I will try to do what I can in a short period of time here.

Not having an experience with the child welfare system, maybe you can answer just a few basic things for me. Is there much contact or connection with others, your peers, in the child welfare system? With a foster placement, are you sort of isolated from the experiences of others?

Just briefly, if you can.

Ms. Alisha Bowie: I will speak on that.

I worked at the Children's Aid Society for about a year. I think Lisa does right now. When you are in foster care, there are supports within the child welfare system. At the Children's Aid Society of Ottawa there is a program known as CAST. It is Children's Aid Society Teams, and youth can come together to support one another within the foster families on the struggles they are going through with group homes, etc.

● (1145)

Mr. Jeff Watson: That is something they can come together for, but other than that, once you're in placement, you're not necessarily connected to the experiences of others in the child welfare system. Is that fair?

Ms. Alisha Bowie: Do you want to speak on that?

Mr. Jeff Watson: Let me go on to the next question, then.

From your experience, can you tell me, in your opinion, whether the child welfare system in Canada is in crisis? We have heard others say that. By your experience—and it could be a simple yes or no.

Ms. Lisa Davis: I can say that it depends upon what province you're in. Again, it's one of those things for which there is no national—

Mr. Jeff Watson: Who is way ahead on that and who is not? Who is setting the gold standard?

Ms. Lisa Davis: It's hard to say because it depends on.... For instance, in Ontario we have 52 or 51 agencies.

Mr. Jeff Watson: I think it's 53.

Ms. Lisa Davies: Fifty-three. And each of them has its own board of directors, and each of them answers to a set of standards; however, they operate in different ways. Not to show too much bias, but I do believe Ottawa is ahead of the curve on a lot of things as a city agency, but again, there is no real standard across the country, and I do feel that it is something that is in crisis.

Mr. Jeff Watson: What incentives or services are terminated once you age out of the system? What are you losing, if you will, in terms of support once you leave the system?

If you can, be as brief as possible on that.

Ms. Lisa Davis: If you've been attending school, you can have support until 21, but I don't know how many here would have finished a degree by the time they were 21. So all of a sudden you are left to hang and left alone, with debt piling up and so on. I know a lot of people pile up debt, but when you've gone through a lot of psychological issues in your young years, it's hard to keep a handle on trying to maintain your education and maintain all the things in your life that you need to do to get ahead to where you need to be to be a productive member of our society.

Mr. Jeff Watson: There are a number of jurisdictions, even within Ontario. We said there are 53 Children's Aid Societies. But across Canada, more broadly speaking, there are a number of systems that deal with child welfare and adoption.

If I hear correctly, are you agreeing with witnesses who have come before that there should be some cross-Canada focus, if you will, to address the child welfare system crisis? That we adopt a national adoption strategy by the federal government and provincial, territorial, and other partners, with a focus on moving children from the system to adoption permanency? Am I hearing that there is agreement from you that we should be doing that?

I see heads nodding.

Ms. Lisa Davis: Absolutely. I think there should be a national strategy. Again, every child should have the same rights, no matter what province they're in.

Mr. Jeff Watson: Can you identify current barriers to adoption right now? I know you mentioned the issue of international adoption, but are there other barriers to children being adopted from the child welfare system? Can you identify some of those for us?

Ms. Lisa Davis: I think, again, there's just not enough focus on the fact that permanency is important. Too often we rely on that foster care system to take care of our children and youth, when there should be a focus that adoption works, that adoption is the better solution because it gives those attachments throughout adult life that the foster care system can't give you when you're being parented by a system.

Mr. Jeff Watson: I have about a minute left, they tell me, and I have two questions. I'll put them out there.

First, for those of you who have been adopted, what supports are needed post-adoption, from your perspective?

Second, also for those on the panel today who are adopted, what challenges did your adoptive caregivers face? I say that with respect to the need for some sort of leave for employment insurance, but I presume it's going to have to be based on the challenges they face. Not the care issues with the children, but what types of things have

they gone through? Are there difficulties attaching as parents? Are there psychological issues they go through—sleep deprivation, things like that? What can you tell me about that?

• (1150)

Ms. Miranda Eggertson: Since I had so much trauma in my eight years before I got adopted...I'm trying to say it correctly. I think parents need a lot of support after, because I gave her so much hell, I guess. I still do, but I know—

Mr. Jeff Watson: I still give my mom a lot of problems, too.

Ms. Miranda Eggertson: I know kids who have always been with their parents still give them hell, but I was testing boundaries because I didn't know if she would leave me. I didn't know if she would put me back. I only had a certain amount of time with her at home, plus I was at school. I would like to have had more time with her, because I needed more time to get close to her, to trust her, because so many people lied to me; so many people didn't say what they were going to do. So I still have those troubles with her, but I would have liked more time with her, and more time for people to help me being adopted, because I was just adopted, and I felt like I didn't have the support that I needed.

The Chair: That is all of Mr. Watson's time, but if anybody else wanted to add anything, I think we'd be.... Do you mind if...?

We'll let Jon finish. We have a little bit of time. We're going to try.

Go ahead.

Mr. Jon Daly: I'd love to add on, but I think Miranda said it perfectly, so I'll let her take the wheel, I guess.

The Chair: It looks as if we have a couple more questions, so we're going to do a very quick two-minute round. We'll just go into the normal schedule, which would mean Mr. Lessard.

Did any of the Liberals have a two-minute question?

Madam Folco actually was first.

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Actually, it's not a question. Thank you, Madam Chair.

What you had to say was very impressive, and the way you said it was also very impressive—I'm speaking to all four of you. You have different stories to tell, and yet each one of you made it very clear what your difficulties were. I want to say that you've shown a lot of courage, a lot of fortitude, and a lot of self-awareness also—and a lot of strength. For me the word "strength" is a very important word.

I want to say that as you look around this table, you see all these adults who have succeeded in their careers and to some extent in their lives as well. Pretty well everyone here is a lot older than you are. You don't know what's in their hearts; you don't know what's in their minds; you don't know what all these people around the table have lived through. You don't know that.

When we see strangers, we always think they've had a good life, had an easy life, and that's why they are what they are now. Let me tell you, I know quite a few people around the table...I won't name names, but if you go around the table, there are people who have lived through war in their childhood, who have lived through difficult adoption, who have had absent parents, who have lived through violence from family members, who have lived through intense poverty, and who have lived through discrimination. That's just around this table.

The reason I'm saying this—I'm very emotional, too—is to tell you not to let go; to tell you that even though you've come through so much already, you have come through, I think, the worst of it, because now you are young adults: you are self-aware; you have the strength. You have proved to yourself that you have the strength, and it is your responsibility now to keep going with that strength and with the generation that you have created—some of you have children—behind you.

I want to congratulate you and say, don't let go. Remember, each one of the adults that you've seen and you're going to be seeing has their individual story, and it's never easy for any one of us.

I just wanted to make that comment.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Folco.

Mr. Vellacott, you may have a quick two-minute question.

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Miranda, Lisa, Alisha, and Jon, I have appreciated your being here today. You're very articulate young people. Some day maybe Jon will be my pilot for Air Canada or WestJet. He's a very incisive guy, but in his comments he doesn't repeat, if somebody else has said it.

But that's what I expect in a pilot, too, so I commend you for it.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Maurice Vellacott: Some of the terms that have been used—forever family, permanence, somebody to go to, connectedness, somebody unconditionally committed to you—terms that you've brought out compellingly to us today, are rather meaningful. I feel in some ways, as we're wrapping the study part up, doubly blessed.

I'm going to throw a curve at the committee here today, because the committee members probably aren't aware that I'm adopted as well. But I also have a loving biological family that I lived all my life with. When I say adopted, I mean I have a Heavenly Father who adopted me, and even when I'm away from my earthly parents through my lifetime, in other parts of the world, other parts of the country, I have been able to have that forever family that has kept me in good stead, if you will.

I say this as well—I'll take my few moments here. We have spoken here before of the faith connection. There's a lot of biblical language, if you ever care to look at it some day, with imagery around adoption. I'm a big fan of adoption for that very reason; it is the precise thing that drives me in being in support of adoption. The Heavenly Father has adopted people for thousands of years, long before.... Which came first, the chicken or the egg, the human or the heavenly adoption? I think it was the heavenly. I would say as well that because of that, I think we as a committee should be individuals

who are also promoting adoption, because there's so much at the core, in terms of its principles that drive this.

That's my encouragement to you and appreciation for what you have conveyed to us today in terms of a forever family. I thank you for being here, each one.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vellacott.

Mr. Lessard, you have two minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for being here. We have all grown up a little this morning as a result of our contact with you. After hearing your testimony, we realize that the course of your lives will be marked by what you have lived through up to now. You can perhaps shed light on something else for us. What we are trying to do here is to find ways to make adoption easier, to provide better conditions, and so on.

But the fact remains that, as we speak, several thousand children are in foster care waiting to be adopted. Our understanding is that a foster family must be a necessary, but very short step before children are adopted, assuming they want to be.

Foster families are like an institution; they will always be there. Knowing that, what steps could we take to ensure that others do not have to live through the bad experiences you had in foster care?

[*English*]

The Chair: Would one of you like to comment on that?

Ms. Lisa Davis: Foster care definitely should be something that's temporary, but as you know from my story and Alisha's, it has been anything but temporary. It was a permanent solution until our adulthood.

To make that not be the case goes back to the supports you can give to people who are willing to adopt. Many of these foster parents who are willing to temporarily help a child would also be willing to forever help a child. It is supposed to be a temporary solution, and I honour foster parents who come forward, but more needs to be done to make sure that no child has only temporary....

I know measures such as the Heart Gallery, in which children make the choice to be a part of a program, to be a part of their own future of being adopted.... It is hugely impactful. It brings results; it brings permanency. It brings older adoption, for a lot of us who don't have that hope of being adopted because we're teenagers—and it is hard to take on a teenager—and it brings forward those people who are willing to take on a teenager. It brings forward people who just want to be parents and maybe don't want to change any diapers.

We should never have temporary and child.... There should always be a long-term, permanent, forever plan for them.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We've come to the end of this part of our meeting.

Again, on behalf of the whole committee, I want to thank you very much. You have had a huge impact on us. We really appreciate it, and I know we all wish you the very best.

I'm going to suspend the meeting now for two minutes. I would ask that the room clear out very quickly, because we have a lot of business to attend to, and we're going to go in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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