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Our legislature has appointed an Interim Committee to look into problems with foster care. This committee is a direct result of the articles published in the Denver Post about the appalling state of our foster care system. The state of Colorado had to get a public black eye before it would take any action on this important issue. Unfortunately, this just looks like another dog and pony show for the benefit of stroking the public back into complacency.

I attended the first session on June 26, 2000. This featured representatives from the State Department of Human Services and representatives from five county departments: Weld, Denver, Mesa, Yuma, and El Paso. These representatives did not acquit themselves well. Members of any DHS agency were unable to provide answers to the Committee's questions. Head of the Department, Marva Hammons, was particularly condescending with her non-responsive replies to committee questions.

There is another meeting scheduled today, July 10, as I write this column. I've spoken with the committee head, Rep. Kay Alexander, about scheduling time on the agenda for representatives of families to make a presentation to the committee. She evidently thought I was simply some disgruntled parent because she placated me with a comment about how the 'public' will be allowed to make comments. When I tried to explain, she brushed me off.

She didn't get it. Funny, Rep. Dorothy Rupert appeared to get it. As I review the agenda for today's meeting, I see that Rep. Alexander has still refused to consider hearing from the family. She clearly is not interested in what the children have to say about foster care. . . even though I told her I have video tapes of children who have run away from foster homes. Demands that representatives of the families be given an agenda item have been ignored.

Evidently, Rep. Alexander has a social worker background. This background appears to preclude any awareness of one simple fact: This children don't belong to the state. They aren't chattel.

These are *our* children who are placed in foster care to be abused and neglected 10 times more often than in their own homes: State sanctioned child abuse and neglect, without accountability or recourse. These are our children who are put in harm's way, where 50% of the children who die of abuse or neglect nationwide are killed by state approved foster care providers: but were these murders are covered up by the agencies who placed the children in those deadly homes.

As parents, we have the right to expect that if our children are going to be removed from our homes based on an accusation of abuse or neglect, that they will be placed in a home that is superior in safety, guidance, nurturing, and care than the home they were removed from. We have the right to expect that our child will have his own bed to sleep in, that he won't be placed with violent or sexually active children, that his emotional needs during the separation from his parents will be realistically met. We have the right to expect that foster homes, group homes, and institutions provide more help than harm to our children.

But the system is designed to perpetuate itself, not to protect abused and neglected children. Otherwise those who derive their incomes from this system would have the answers to the questions asked by the committee. DHS had no answers. The experts couldn't or wouldn't give the responses needed to make foster care safer. I have the answers the committee is looking for. But they evidently don't really want any answers.

These children are OURS, Rep. Alexander. If you don't hear from the children and the families for more than a three minute public comment, you are not fulfilling your responsibility to the public. I don't mean horror stories. I mean a prepared analysis which supports our complaints of the systemic problems surrounding foster care and our proposed solutions. If you don't hear from the families, then you have made a tacit admission that this isn't about families, it's about perpetuating and protecting the bureaucracy. Since foster care issues affect families, if you don't hear from the families, Rep. Alexander, you are anti-family.

Child Protective Services agencies have had 25 years to get it right. Their expertise has produced the devastating problems we must endure today. Perhaps it's time to consider that the experts are only testing their pet theories with the American family as the guinea pigs; and the test subjects are suffering as a result.

Let's inject some common sense and compassion into this debate. Listen to the client families that are served by DHS and foster care. Before it's too late. Before another child is brutalized or killed in these so-called 'safe' foster homes.