

Jeff Antoniewicz

Opponent statement on SB 401

Senate Committee on Federal and State Affairs

March 21, 2018

Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the committee:

I am Jeff Antoniewicz. My husband David and I have been together and resided in the great state of Kansas for over 17 years. Despite being treated differently or poorly so often for being gay, we still wanted to be parents and raise family. Therefore, after being together for 10 years we decided to start our adoption journey by becoming foster parents.

David and I are the proud parents of three elementary school age boys. Our oldest is about to become a teenager this year.

Prior to coming into foster care, the boys were living in deplorable conditions in small Kansas town. Their biological mother had lost custody of them and was accused of child endangerment, neglect and abuse. She had served time in prison two different times and tested positive for drugs days before giving birth to our two youngest sons. The state had removed all three boys from their biological mother and placed them with their grandmother who also had a prison record. While all the boys had the same biological mother, only the oldest had a biological father listed on his birth certificate. Their biological father had also served different sentences in prison for various crimes and was in and out of the boys lives. Eventually, for their safety, the state removed all three boys from the care of any of any of their biological family.

After being brought into foster care, it's our understanding based on reports from the state that the boys had been in up to 10 different foster homes within two years that were originally intended to be long term placements. In several instances, they were removed because their behavior was so challenging. In those homes where they stayed longer, they were placed in another 10+ different homes for "respite" care, on weekends and/or holidays. Each time, they had to adjust to a new group of people, a new schedule, a new home and a new set

of rules. Most of the time they had to integrate into an existing family who already had children living in the home.

While in the custody of the state, our oldest and youngest had to have to have extensive dental done work due to the absence of dental hygiene with their birth families. In fact, their "silver" teeth haunt them today as they are so self-conscious about them. All three boys were also diagnosed with ADHD and were being over medicated since they had such little consistency in the system with medical care.

After about a year in the same foster home, that family gave their 30-day notice as foster parents. David and I received a call from a foster care agency asking if we would take an emergency placement of a sibling set of three. When accepting the placement, the only thing we knew is that they were boys, elementary school age, biracial and had some behavioral issues. If the boys were not placed with us, they would end up being split into two or three different homes. We had heard from other same-sex couples that fostered that we, as same-sex couples, often get the hard to place children that other people may find more challenging. We also learned that our boys were (in adoption circles) considered unmarketable because, (1) they were over the age of three, (2) they were boys, (3) they were not Caucasian and (4) they were a sibling set of three that the state wanted to keep together if possible.

At the time, the twins were 4 and their older brother was 6 years old. While they had been cared for well by their most recent foster family, the effects of being victims of abuse and neglect had already taken their toll. They often talk about their memories of police taking away their family members or having to pick up rats in the trailer the throw them away. Those are two of many memories they hold onto.

After being placed as foster care children in our home, my husband had our lives turned upside down. We went from being a family of two to a family of five overnight. We realized quickly that a lot needed to change. For example, neither one of us had a car that could accommodate three car seats in the back seat. As a result, we bought a mini-van. It wasn't the most fashionable vehicle, but it was the most functional. Thank God at that time, we were in a position to purchase a new vehicle.

In those first few months of being foster parents, we spent most of our time dealing with the school and daycare calling because our children couldn't behave. We would explain over and over to teachers and daycare providers that these poor boys had experienced more in their short little lives that most adults do in a lifetime. Things got so bad that the youngest two boys were expelled from their daycare.

We spent the first six months after their arrival providing structure and consistency. Although David and I both worked full time, we found the time to learn the basics of ethnic hair and skin care. It's quite different and a lot more work than we were used to, being white men who could get ready for work in a matter of minutes.

We also spent quite a bit of time on the phone being frustrated. We had to learn quickly how to navigate the Kansas state Medicaid program, KanCare. One almost needs a PhD to figure that system out.

Each week, we took time off work, went to school and daycare, picked up the boys, and then went to a doctor or therapy appointment. In addition to their dental issues, the boys were diagnosed with ADHD, PTSD, two of them with asthma and the oldest with reactive attachment disorder.

Eighteen months after being placed with us as a foster family, we adopted the three boys. However, rather than waiting for adoption, we almost immediately after arriving in our home decided to focus on the future. We paid for private tutoring so that all three boys would be able to catch up academically to their peers. We got the boys private health insurance in order to expand their access to medical care and we enrolled them into various sports and community programs.

Today they are thriving, our oldest is about to get braces, he plays competitive soccer and is in our school districts honor band. Academically he is doing well, getting several A's and B's on his report cards.

Our youngest two sons are doing remarkably well considering how academically behind they had been. Both have exceeded their IEP reading goals at school and are both in the band as well. They play competitive soccer and also wrestle competitively.

In addition to school and sports, our family also emphasizes giving back. We spend as much time as possible volunteering in the community. Our family also has a strong faith. We are extremely active in our local religious community. We emphasize that everyone is created equally. Since our boys are biracial, we remind them all the time that people can't discriminate against you because of your skin color, religion or because you have two dads. Our story and experience is a piece of history that we hope is repeated, over and over.

Ours was a perfect match and one that might not have been possible had an agency been allowed to discriminate against us for being a same-sex couple. Although it's been six years since we adopted, David and I still review state statistics on the number of children in foster care. We are both surprised to find that the number of foster children increases each year and that there is still such a great need for foster homes. With that said, we often wonder why anyone would want to discriminate, or reduce the number of available homes for placement.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am available to stand for questions.