



1110 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 900 | Washington, DC 20005 | T: 202.657.0670 | F: 202.657.0671 | www.childwelfaresparc.org

**FIRST FOCUS STATE POLICY ADVOCACY AND REFORM CENTER (SPARC)
STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON FINANCE
EXAMINING THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

February 23, 2016

Chairman Hatch, Ranking Member Wyden, and Members of the Senate Committee on Finance, we thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement for the record on the hearing focused on addressing the opioid epidemic, currently posing a serious threat to children and families across the United States.

The First Focus State Policy and Advocacy Reform Center (SPARC) is a coalition of state-based advocacy organizations committed to improving the safety, health and well-being of children and families involved in the child welfare system. Many of the SPARC state partners live in communities that are seriously impacted by the opioid crisis and concerned about its impact on children, particularly those at risk of entering the foster care system. The purpose of this statement is to draw the connections between the opioid crisis and challenges faced by state and county child welfare systems that serve as our nation's safety net and offer recommendations on how to ensure better outcomes for families that struggle with substance abuse issues.

Parental substance abuse and opioid use have long been identified as a factor that results in families and children becoming involved in the child welfare system. In 2012, 30.5 percent of child removals – more than one of every four -- were due to parental use of alcohol and other drugs. 66 percent of children in foster care have lived with someone with an alcohol or drug problem.¹ In addition, as a recent Reuters series on the crisis highlighted, newborns exposed prenatally to opioids also face significant safety risks. Some are removed at birth, separating families and placing significant strains on the child welfare system, while others may suffer abuse or neglect when they are sent home with parents abusing opioids.² The National Institute on Drug Abuse estimates that 21,372 babies were born with neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS) in 2012, 5 times the number born with NAS in 2000.³

States are taking actions to address the opioid crisis. Many states, including Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia have formed state-level taskforces made up of experts who offer recommendations to the state Governors and Attorney Generals. State Legislatures have also introduced and enacted a significant number of bills to curb the use of opioids in their states. Common threads in these policies include: establishing electronic prescription drug monitoring programs (PDMP) to ensure that patients are not dispensed more medications than necessary; increasing access to naloxone, which counters the effects of opioid overdose; and increasing resources for treatment and

¹ Gardner, S. (2014) *State-Level Policy Advocacy for Children Affected by Parental Substance Use*, Retrieved from: <http://childwelfaresparc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/State-Level-Policy-Advocacy-for-Children-Affected-by-Parental-Substance-Use.pdf>

² Wilson, Duff, John, Shiffman. "The Most Vulnerable Victims of America's Opioid Epidemic." *Reuters*, Thompson Reuters, 07 Dec. 2016. Retrieved from: <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/baby-opioids/#article-about-the-series>

³ Patrick et. Al., JAMA 2012, Patrick et. Al., Journal of Perinatology 2015

services. However, many of these state-wide initiatives fail to draw the connections between the substance abuse and opioid problem and the risk for child abuse and neglect, as well as the impact on the foster care system.

Importantly, there are also some states that are implementing evidence based, evidence informed, and promising programs to ensure better outcomes for both children and their parents who are struggling with opioid use, including:

- Parent-Child Interaction Therapy and Parent-Child Psychotherapy in Nebraska, which promotes positive parenting and attachment between parents and their children
- Developmental assessments and therapy for prenatally exposed children, including post-natal follow up services in Illinois.
- The Engaging Moms Program in Florida, which provides case management by specially trained caseworkers for mothers in treatment programs.

We are pleased that the Family First Act proposal put forth by Chairman Hatch and Ranking Member Wyden recognizes that states need access to reliable federal funds so they can address parental substance use – before children face serious safety threats -- to prevent children from entering the child welfare system. The Family First Act would allow states the flexibility to use Title IV-E dollars for substance abuse treatment that works so that parents can receive effective services before they present safety concerns that prompt removal of their children from the home.

The Family First Act would be a significant step forward to support and strengthen families who have addiction issues and are involved with the child welfare system. .

Additional steps that can be taken at the federal level include: incentives for better cross-agency collaboration between substance abuse, child welfare and mental health systems; enforcement of provisions in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) to report babies who are exposed to opioids prenatally to child welfare agencies; uniform practices for states in screening and recording substance abuse as an element of child maltreatment; prioritizing treatment for child welfare involved families; and strengthening family drug court programs to ensure courts are working with families holistically to ensure the safety and best interest of children living in families with substance abuse problems.

We thank you again for the opportunity to submit this written testimony and look forward to working with you to implement policies that prevent children from harm because of substance abuse and opioid use. Should there be any questions regarding this statement, please contact Richa Mathur, Senior Policy Advisor of Child Welfare and Child Rights at (202) 999-4852 or rricham@firstfocus.org.