

March 15, 2021

The Honorable Dick Durbin  
Chairman  
Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles E. Grassley  
Ranking Member  
Committee on the Judiciary  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

RE: My adoption story and the negative impact of H.R. 5

Dear Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Grassley, and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee:

My name is Melissa Buck. I am a proud adoptive parent of five amazing special needs children and my husband, Chad, and I are in the process of adopting one more beautiful child. The journey we have taken—from infertility to a fast-growing family—has had many twists, turns, and bumps along the way. But I know for certain that we would never have been able to open our home and our hearts to six amazing children without the help of St. Vincent Catholic Charities. I am forever grateful for their support. We could not have walked this journey without them. That is why I submit my story to you today. The Equality Act puts at risk the life-transforming work of heroic foster care and adoption workers, and takes choices away from adoptive families like mine.

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Like a lot of couples, my husband and I yearned for children. But our hopes were dashed by the cruel reality of infertility. After years of trying and treatments, we turned to adoption. This led us to our local adoption agency, St. Vincent Catholic Charities in Lansing, Michigan. While we are not Catholic, we chose St. Vincent because of its stellar reputation in the community—something we can now attest to first hand. St. Vincent is one of over 25 private agencies that partner with the state to find loving homes for the nearly 13,000 children in the state's foster care system.

Little did we know where this journey would take us. Within a few months of partnering with St. Vincent, their staff asked if we would consider adopting three (three!) severely neglected siblings at the same time. These children desperately needed a loving home. Siblings, unfortunately, are often separated when they enter

foster care. But there was no separating these three. All under the age of five, they had learned to survive by—often literally—clinging to each other for comfort and shelter. The oldest, just four years old, was responsible for feeding and caring for his newborn sister. If she cried, he would be beaten.

There is no pamphlet, book, or class that can prepare you for the reality of adopting three children at once who have suffered severe emotional and physical trauma. It is a journey you walk one extraordinarily unpredictable step at a time, and one we were only able to manage with the staff of St. Vincent walking every step of it by our side. St. Vincent's team answered our late night worried phone calls, calmed the biological parents when they became hostile, and accompanied us to countless doctor visits to treat our children's many medical needs. They were a shoulder to cry on, a rock during unsteady times, and a constant source of support and encouragement. But the staff at St. Vincent didn't just save the lives of my children; they accompanied us every step of the way in the joy-filled journey of giving them new lives.

Mine is just one of thousands of stories of lives changed by the incredible staff at St. Vincent Catholic Charities. St. Vincent supports those in need through its adoption and foster care program, immigration law clinic, children's home, and counseling and refugee services, just to name a few. The work of St. Vincent is daunting, often thankless, and never ending. Children are daily removed from abuse and neglect and need loving, stable homes. Refugees resettling in Lansing need language support, transportation, housing, and education. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, St. Vincent's work has become even more critical—from helping refugees who don't speak english get vaccinated to supporting families struggling with distance learning, or even just putting food on their table. Now is not the time to undermine St. Vincent's incredible ministry or put their future good work at risk. But the Equality Act threatens the great work that faith-based groups are doing across the nation. Instead, we all must lean in to this incredible work by supporting—not threatening—our most effective agencies.

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When St. Vincent's staff later approached my husband and I about adopting a new biological sibling of our children who was born after they were adopted, our first reaction was to say no. Raising multiple children with a range of special needs was hard, and I was recovering from the devastating loss of a surprise pregnancy. I had already named the baby we lost Nathaniel. When we expressed this hesitation about another adoption to St. Vincent, the staff didn't pressure us. They only asked us to pray for the right home for this new baby. His name, a St. Vincent worker told me, was Nathaniel. We adopted again, our fifth.

At this point, we believed that our adoptive journey was done, and that our family was complete. But, as hectic as life was with five special needs kids, we had

always said that we would be open to adopting again if another sibling of our children needed a home. That call came last year, when we learned a sister of our youngest son needed a home, and we have started the adoption process for our sixth child. Without St. Vincent's, we would not be able to adopt her. Keeping siblings together means so much to us because it is so important to our kids. Their bond to one another as biological siblings is special—something to be treasured, and not something we would ever want to deny them. Closing agencies because of their religious beliefs jeopardizes these sibling bonds. It means that future siblings are far more likely to end up separated, breaking the only biological family ties these kids have left. This denies the children we are supposed to be protecting a relationship with one another—and it often denies them even the *knowledge* that they are not alone, that they have siblings who might love them, if only they knew them.

Families like mine have a choice of foster and adoption agencies, and we want what all parents want—to choose what is best for children in need. The Equality Act would limit those choices by telling families like mine that we can't choose a faith-affirming agency if we receive federal funds to help pay for the care and medical needs of our children.

Thank you for giving me and my children a voice,

Melissa Buck