



**EQUALITY  
ILLINOIS**

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Chairman Harmon, Vice-Chairman Silverstein, Senators:

I thank you for the opportunity to address you today about proposed Amendment 1 to Senate Bill 1123, which would exempt religiously affiliated child welfare organizations from having to comply with the existing adoption and foster care standards of the State of Illinois.

I am here not only as CEO of Equality Illinois, which advocates for full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in this great State, but also as a proud adoptive father of a 16-month-old beautiful baby girl.

My partner Danny and I have been together for eight years. He teaches Holocaust, genocide and human rights education design at Northwestern University and has recently been appointed to serve on the Illinois Holocaust & Genocide Commission.

We named our daughter Miriam after the biblical prophetess and also after my great-grandmother Miriam who was forced to live her life in hiding as a converso Jew in Spain, but whose faith never faltered.

In the Jewish tradition, we believe that matching adoptive parents with their children is a divine task. The Talmud teaches that "Whoever adopts a child into his home is regarded ... as though the child had been born to him" and it is "he who brings up a child is for whom God intended to be called its father."

Incidentally, Miriam's biblical brother Moses was also adopted, so that his life may be spared and that he may return to redeem his people. Next week, the Jewish people around the world will celebrate that holiday of redemption and freedom. In that most famous biblical story of adoption, even God did not impose a religious test in selecting Moses' adoptive parents.

I ask you to look at this bill from the perspective of the child in the adoption or foster care system.

Up to now, the singular standard for adoptions and foster care decisions in Illinois and across the country has been the best interests of the child. That is, finding the best set of parents or foster carers for each child's unique needs.

If you vote for this amendment, then you will fundamentally change that approach. Instead of matching children in their care with the best set of parents for each child, religiously motivated agencies would be allowed to apply their own standard and reject those best sets of parents only because they are a same-sex couple in a loving, committed relationship expressed in a civil union.

In a sense, we will be creating a Russian Roulette for the children in the State's child welfare program: some children will go through the agencies where best parents would be considered for their individual needs; and other children would be with the agencies that would reject the best parents for them.

We cannot play spin-the-roulette with children's welfare.

Limiting the pool of eligible parents only hurts the children in the adoption and foster care system. According to latest US Department of Health & Human Services numbers, there are nearly 20,000 children in Illinois in foster care or adoption process. Current law requires all agencies to use best-interests-of-the-child standard. All agencies receiving public funds should continue to apply this standard and not be allowed to discriminate using religious pretext.

This is not about religious or conscientious objections, but about what's best for children. And religiously affiliated child welfare agencies in the State of California, in New York, the District of Columbia, and all across the country – including Catholic agencies – continue to provide adoption and foster care services, despite those states' refusal to grant them a special exemption.

And people of faith consistently agree that we should be focused on the wellbeing of the children in the system, and not on the sexual orientation of the parents. For example: according to Public Religion Research Institute poll released just a few weeks ago, 60% of American Catholics believe that same-sex couples should not be limited in their ability to adopt or foster children.

If an agency is not able to put the best interests of the child above all else, then it should not be providing adoption and foster care services, and it should certainly not get an exemption to accommodate its bigotry. To allow otherwise is simply unacceptable: when it comes to child welfare, there cannot be double standards.

Danny and I believe that Miriam was also divinely intended to be our daughter. And just as I cannot imagine my life without her in it, I cannot imagine of how life would have turned out if the bill you are considering today were law and if our adoption agency had decided to reject Danny and me only because we are a committed, same-sex couple in a civil union relationship. And how would you explain that to Miriam?

I ask you to look at this bill from the perspective of the child in the adoption or foster care system and to vote against this Amendment.

Thank you.

Bernard Cherkasov  
*Chief Executive Officer*