



Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR

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The Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Chairman

Opening Statement of Chairman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott (VA-03)
House Committee on Education and Labor Full Committee Hearing
Markup: H.R. 2480 - Stronger Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act
2175 Rayburn House Office Building
Wednesday, May 8, 2019 at 10:15 a.m.

Today, we are here to markup H.R. 2480, the *Stronger Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act*, or Stronger CAPTA, a bipartisan bill to invest in families and improve the health and safety of our nation's children.

Following the enactment of the first *Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act*, or *CAPTA*, more than three decades ago, the rates of child abuse and neglect steadily declined. But in recent years, as the opioid epidemic and other pressures have devastated communities and families across the country, we have seen a worrisome increase in the prevalence of child maltreatment.

While it is too soon to definitively connect the opioid epidemic and the rise in child maltreatment, evidence suggests that the two are closely linked.

Today, 1 in 7 children suffers from child abuse or neglect. From immediate physical injury to long-term emotional trauma, child maltreatment can permanently hinder a child's development and have lifelong consequences.

Congress has charged this Committee with the legislative responsibility to assist in eradicating this crisis. The bipartisan legislation before us today updates CAPTA to fulfill this important responsibility in four important ways.

First, *Stronger CAPTA* elevates the importance of federal investment in prevention.

Research shows that the best way to protect children is to provide both targeted prevention to families at high-risk of maltreatment and primary prevention services that reach families before they become vulnerable to the factors associated with abuse and neglect.

Yet, prevention services have long been under-funded, leaving many states with the ability to support only a fraction of families in need.

In response, *Stronger CAPTA* authorizes substantial federal support to help states build delivery systems of prevention services capable of reaching more than 3 million children and families every year. This investment will not only strengthen families and protect children, it will save taxpayers an billions of dollars annually. Spending more money to prevent child maltreatment means spending a lot less money on special education, healthcare, and criminal justice.

While this initial investment does not fully meet the growing need for preventative services, it is an important step forward.

The second pillar of *Stronger CAPTA* provides greater support to help child protective services agencies – CPS – across the country by providing funding to improve the professional development and retention of CPS staff.

Reports to CPS have increased 10 percent in the last five years. Overburdened and underfunded, CPS agencies have struggled to respond promptly and thoroughly to every case. Failure to respond promptly has the effect of putting children at greater risk.

The bill's support for CPS will help families receive prompt, effective services to ensure the safety and well-being of children and help families get through difficult circumstances.

Third, *Stronger CAPTA* improves the quality of federal and state data – a critical component in the fight against child abuse and neglect.

Business leaders remind us that you cannot manage what you do not measure. That's why the bill improves the integrity of national data on child fatalities, fulfilling a recommendation of the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities.

The bill will also allow states to easily, quickly, and securely share data about families who have come into contact with CPS, empowering caseworkers to make better informed decisions that could prevent difficult circumstances from becoming catastrophic.

Had this data exchange system been in place last year, it is likely we would have prevented the tragic death of Heaven Watkins, an 11-year-old girl who died last year as a result of child abuse. Heaven's parents had a known history of child abuse in Minnesota, but authorities in Virginia did not recognize the need for immediate intervention because they were not aware of this history. By breaking down barriers to information, we can prevent children like Heaven from slipping through the cracks.

Finally, *Stronger CAPTA* builds upon a bipartisan commitment to help families grow stronger and stay together.

For too long, federal funds have focused not on building strong families, but on treating and punishing broken ones. That's the wrong approach.

Two years ago, Congress passed the historic *Family First Prevention Services Act*—led by former Congressman Sander Levin—which shifted federal investments in child welfare from a sole focus on treatment to a strong focus on prevention. The legislation we're discussing today represents the next step forward on this path by expanding prevention services to all families and by adding further protections to ensure that families stay intact when doing so is in the child's best interest.

The bill also includes initiatives sponsored by the gentlelady of Wisconsin, Ms. Moore, to ensure that children are not removed from their families solely on the basis of poverty. It further calls on states to ensure that decisions about child removal are driven by data, not racial stereotypes.

The bill also includes language to direct states to institute task forces to make recommendations to assess the efficacy of their state laws with regard to widespread child sexual abuse carried out by some of our most trusted institutions in society.

I want to recognize Ms. Schrier and Mr. Comer for their leadership in drafting this bipartisan bill. I'd also like to recognize Ms. Bonamici, Ms. Trahan, Mr. Johnson, Ms. Stefanik, and, of course, our Ranking Member Dr. Foxx for their work on this vital, bipartisan priority.

I strongly urge my colleagues to support this legislation, and I yield to Dr. Foxx for the purpose of an opening statement.