

“choices” in this bill are in effect risky chances.

Mr. President, if we revisit this issue in the future, I believe we must closely consider these factors. Ultimately, we must also note that we cannot advance reform without taking our federal system into consideration. What is right in Alabama, or North Dakota or Connecticut. States must play the preeminent role in setting the course for tort law reform. Common sense demands it, our legal traditions demand it, and our Constitution demands it.●

THE STRENGTHENING ABUSE AND NEGLECT COURTS ACT

● Mr. ROCKEFELLER. Mr. President, I rise today to join Mr. DEWINE in his introduction of the Strengthening Abuse and Neglect Courts Act. I would like to thank Mr. DEWINE of this leadership on this bill, another example of his ongoing commitment to our Nation's most vulnerable children and families. I would also like to thank my good friends Ms. LANDRIEU and Mr. CHAFEE for their support of and input on this legislation.

Last year at this time, Congress passed and President Clinton signed into law the Adoption and Safe Families Act, the most sweeping piece of child welfare legislation in more than two decades. For the first time, this law establishes that a child's health and safety must be the paramount consideration when any decision is made regarding a child in the abuse and neglect system. The law promotes stability and permanence for abused and neglected children by requiring timely decision-making in proceedings to determine whether children can safely return to their families or whether they should be moved into safe and stable adoptive homes. More specifically, the law requires a State to move to terminate the parental right of any parent whose child has been in foster care for 15 out of the last 22 months. While essential to protect children, these accelerated time lines increase the pressure on the Nation's already overburdened abuse and neglect courts.

Our courts play a vital role in the Nation's abuse and neglect system. Through my discussions with judges in my state of West Virginia and across the country, I have learned that abuse and neglect judges make some of the most difficult decisions made by any members of the judiciary. Adjudications of abuse and neglect, terminations of parental rights, approval of adoptions, and life-changing determinations are not made without careful and sometimes painful deliberation. Despite the courts' commitment to the fair and efficient administration of justice in these cases, staggering increases in the number of children in the abuse and neglect system, have placed a tremendous burden on our abuse and neglect courts.

Many abuse and neglect courts have found creative and effective new ways

to eliminate their backlogs and move children more efficiently and safely through the court system. In West Virginia, Supreme Court Justice Margaret Workman and a dedicated group of judges and attorneys have developed a comprehensive plan to increase the accountability and efficient administration of abuse and neglect cases. In Cincinnati, Ohio, Judge Grossman's abuse and neglect courts have implemented state-of-the-art computer tracking systems which help them smooth the legal paths of children in foster care.

The purpose of the Strengthening Abuse and Neglect Courts Act is to help remove the burdens on an even greater number of abuse and neglect courts by increasing their administrative efficiency and effectiveness. The bill establishes a program which will provide grants to state and local courts for the creation and implementation of computerized casetracking systems, similar to the one that has seen such incredible success in Ohio. Through the establishment of such systems, courts are able to more easily track how long a child spends in foster care and the status of their cases. Such easy-to-access information will allow courts to move children more quickly and efficiently through the foster care system and into adoptive homes and other permanent placements. This grant program will also enable state and local courts to design and use similar computer systems and to allow for the replication of similar models in other jurisdictions. The technical assistance provision in this bill provides additional funds to aid these courts in the design and implementation of their new computer programs.

Throughout the debate on the Adoption and Safe Families Act, we heard from dozens of judges who said that the biggest problems facing their courts was the overwhelming backlog of abuse and neglect cases. Without creative ways to eliminate such backlogs, the judges argued, new cases will never move smoothly through the court system. That is why this bill also authorizes a grant program to provide State courts with the funds they need to eliminate current backlogs once and for all. For some courts, that might involve the temporary hiring of an additional judge, a temporary extension of court hours, or restructuring the duties of court personnel. This program will provide grants to those court projects that will result in the effective and rapid elimination of current backlogs to smooth the way for a more efficient courts in the future.

The Strengthening the Abuse and Neglect Courts also recognizes the need to improve training, continuing education opportunities, and model practice standards for judges, attorneys and other court personnel who work in the abuse and neglect courts. More specifically, the bill requires that abuse and neglect agencies design and encourage the implementation of “best practice” standards for those attorneys rep-

resenting the agencies in abuse and neglect cases. The Act also extends the federal reimbursement for training currently provided to agency representatives to judges, court personnel, law enforcement representatives, guardians-ad-litem, and the other attorneys who practice in abuse and neglect proceedings. For the first time, such reimbursement would help fund specialized cross-trainings between agency and court personnel and trainings that focus on vital subjects such as new research on child development.

In addition to the judges, guardians-ad-litem and attorneys in the abuse and neglect courts, volunteers for the Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program also play a key role in helping abused and neglected children in the court system. CASA volunteers are the eyes and the ears of the courts, spending time with abused and neglected children, interviewing the adults involved in their lives, and helping to give judges a better understanding of the needs of each individual child. Despite the incredible success of the CASA programs, thousands of abused and neglected children do not have the benefit of CASA representation. The Strengthening Abuse and Neglect Courts Act provides CASA with a \$5 million grant to expand its programs into under-served areas and to improve its ability to recruit, train and supervise volunteers in already existing programs.

When we talk about child welfare in this country, abuse and neglect courts are too often left out of the discussion. This is an unacceptable mistake, since our courts play a central role in the well-being of our nation's abused and neglected children. I am confident that the Strengthening Abuse and Neglect Courts Act will be valuable first step in making these courts stronger and more efficient than ever, and I ask my colleagues to join us in this important effort.●

RECOGNITION OF MS. VERONICA CALVILLO

● Mr. GORTON. Mr. President, I speak today in recognition of a young woman from my home state of Washington, Ms. Veronica Calvillo. Ms. Calvillo, a sophomore at Seattle University, is the recipient of a scholarship from the Hispanic College Fund. While I did not have the good fortune of attending the recent awards dinner at which Ms. Calvillo spoke, I have heard from many who did attend that she made a remarkable impression. After reading the remarks she made at that dinner, I can certainly understand why. Through her remarks, Ms. Calvillo shows herself to be an intelligent, mature and centered young woman. Ms. Calvillo and her family are truly an example of what is best about America. I ask that Ms. Calvillo's remarks be printed in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD.

The remarks follow.