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Opening Statement of Senator Charles E. Grassley
Senate Committee on Finance Executive Session, September 10, 2008

Mr. Chairman, I am very pleased that the Committee is meeting to mark up three important measures that will enhance safety for seniors and improve adoption assistance and foster care for children. I have heard you refer to the maxim that a society should be judged by how it treats its most vulnerable citizens. Today, we are making good progress on that measure. Additionally, the process by which we came to agreement on these three bills was a productive, bipartisan process. The Senate Finance Committee has a long-standing reputation as being one of the most functional and bipartisan committee in the Congress. This meeting today reflects the traditional manner in which the Finance Committee has operated and I am very appreciative of that.

While I am very supportive of the Elder Justice Act and the background check bill, I am especially pleased that we are considering the bill I introduced earlier this year, S. 3038, the “Improved Adoption Incentives and Relative Guardianship Support Act of 2008.” My bill would reauthorize and improve the adoption incentives program and phase in extending adoption assistance to all families. Adoption is such a lifeline, in so many ways. There is no greater gift than giving a child who does not have a family a loving home. People in their twenties who age out of foster care and are not adopted still speak of the ache of not having a family.

Adoption incentives work. We can look back and take pride in the progress we have made in the ten years since Congress enacted the adoption incentive program as part of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. In the past ten years, adoptions facilitated by child welfare agencies, have risen from 31,000 in 1997 to 51,000 in 2006. However, there is more that can and should be done to support adoption and other permanency options for children. Approximately 129,000 children in foster care are waiting for a permanent, safe and loving home. Because of an outdated formula, the Adoption Incentives program does not work as well as it should. My bill makes that improvement. For children for whom adoption is not possible, my bill would also create an additional option for a permanent home with a relative for children who would otherwise be in foster care. According to analysis for the Center for Law and Social Policy, children in kinship foster care have been found to experience fewer placement changes than children placed with non-kin foster parents do. Fewer children in kinship care report having changed schools than do children in non-relative foster care or those in group care. Compared to children in non-relative foster care and those in group care, children in kinship care are: more likely to report liking those with whom they live, they are more likely to report wanting their current placement to be their permanent home. They are less likely to report having tried to leave or run away. Most importantly however, children in kinship care are also

more likely to report that they “always felt loved.”

Mr. Chairman, you were very generous to notice this mark up as a modification of my bill. I am very grateful to you for your courtesy in so doing that. The modification before the committee reflects the work of many members on and off the committee. It is the most far-reaching and significant child welfare bill that the committee has considered in a decade. The bill the committee will consider owes a considerable debt to yourself and Senator Smith for being longtime champions of allowing Indian tribes the ability to run their own foster care program. Senator Bunning has been a long-time advocate of adoption. This bill includes a provision from Senator Snowe that would direct funds to guardians to make them aware of services for which they may be eligible. The committee is deeply indebted to the work done by Senator Rockefeller over many years relating to child welfare. Senator Lincoln is also a very strong voice for children.

Mr. Chairman, I know that the issue of children aging out of foster care is of particular importance to you. It is heartbreaking to hear accounts of a child, who on their 18th birthday, has to put his or her few belongings in a trash bag and then is driven to a homeless shelter. That is simply intolerable and I support the state option to extend foster care coverage to children up to age 21. The committee is taking a significant step in improving the lives of some of our most vulnerable children.

I look forward to moving this process forward to enactment of this legislation before the Congress adjourns this month, especially since the Adoption Incentives program expires at the end of this month. On the Elder Justice Act, Mr. Chairman, I have been a long time supporter of this bill. Under my Chairmanship, the committee marked this bill up twice. Hopefully, as they say, “The third time’s the charm!” I am proud that several provisions in this bill are a result of the work I did as Chairman of the Senate Aging Committee. While I was Chairman of that Committee, we did very important work on nursing home abuse and nursing home standards. A number of the reforms included in the Elder Justice Act were developed as a byproduct of those oversight activities. I want to commend the two current sponsors of the legislation, Senators Hatch and Lincoln. It is a direct result of their commitment to ensuring that every older person is free from abuse, neglect and exploitation that we are here today to consider this important piece of legislation. They have shown great tenacity in advocating for the advancement of this legislation. I am also supportive of efforts to allow states to opt into the background check demonstration program established in the MMA. I understand that HHS has released an evaluation on the demonstration program established in the MMA. I hope that states will find the evaluation useful in determining whether or not to participate in the extended demo. Generally, I hope that the information gained from this expanded demonstration program will be useful and that all states will more vigorously screen caregivers for individuals in nursing homes.