

United States Senate

January 22, 2017

The Honorable Steve Bullock
Governor
State of Montana
Helena, MT

The Honorable Scott Sales
President of the Senate
Montana Senate
Helena, MT

The Honorable Austin Knudsen
Speaker of the House
Montana House of Representatives
Helena, MT

Dear Governor Bullock, Senate President Sales, and Speaker Knudsen:

I write regarding the recently released Department of Justice Child Fatality Review Report that chronicled the tragic loss of fourteen children in Montana, eleven under the age of two, whose vulnerability was known to Montana child welfare authorities prior to their deaths. I'm truly saddened, sickened and grief ridden that these children's death could have been prevented. I strongly urge you to consider the report's recommendation—which is attached—and to take swift and meaningful actions during your legislative session to create a stronger child welfare system in our state and help prevent the loss of such innocent children in the future. We must ensure our children are kept safe, out of harm's way.

As noted in the recent *Great Falls Tribune* article entitled [Report: 14 Montana kids died within a year of abuse reports](#), "The review team found that 12 of the cases involved more than one indicator of abuse including prior history with the agency, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and housing or other financial instability." I recognize the enormous challenge associated with safeguarding children whose well-being is truly at risk while protecting parental rights and doing everything possible to keep families intact, but the failure to take the necessary preventive actions in light of these indicators is inexcusable. The sharp increase in recent years of Montana children in foster care suggests that our child welfare challenges are becoming even more complex and difficult. Consistent with the findings and recommendations of the report, the strong relationship between child neglect and substance abuse, mental health issues, and domestic violence makes timely prevention efforts, such as effective drug treatments, and appropriate consultation between child protection, medical, and law enforcement personnel all-the-more paramount. I encourage you to pursue reforms that strengthen Montana's child welfare initiatives with these objectives in mind.

As you know, the federal government plays a support role in child welfare matters by providing substantial resources to help states and Indian tribes carry out their related policies. In Fiscal Year 2015, I understand Montana received over \$25 million in federal child welfare support. In addition, with my support Congress has increased funding for court appointed special advocates, fourteen of which are in Montana, in recognition of their important work. Building on reforms enacted in 2006 and 2008, moreover, Congress in recent years has considered additional policies to maximize the effective use of federal resources by further encouraging prevention efforts, family preservation, and placement in permanent homes wherever possible. I welcome your feedback on potential changes to federal policy as Congress continues these discussions.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter of utmost importance, and I look forward to monitoring your work during your legislative session to improve Montana's child welfare system so that the safety and dignity of every vulnerable child in Montana is prioritized and protected.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Steve Daines". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steve" and last name "Daines" clearly legible.

STEVE DAINES
United States Senator

Courtesy copy:

Members of the 65th Legislature