

# Austin American-Statesman

## Austinite's nomination to Trump administration post facing headwinds

By Maria Recio

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WASHINGTON — The nomination of Elizabeth Darling, head of an Austin nonprofit, to oversee federal programs for children and families ran into political headwinds Tuesday, even as the Senate Finance Committee advanced her path to confirmation.

Most Democrats on the committee opposed Darling's nomination, unhappy with a new Trump administration faith-based policy on foster children.

Darling, president and CEO of OneStar Foundation, a state-sponsored group that supports nonprofits and whose board members are chosen by Gov. Greg Abbott, was tapped by President Donald Trump to be commissioner on children, youth, and families at the Department of Health and Human Services. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, voted with all the Republicans on the committee in favor of her nomination.

Darling's nomination now awaits a vote on the Senate floor, but it is not an automatic process, even though the GOP has a majority of members.

The top-ranked Democrat on the committee, Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said he would place a hold on her nomination, a senatorial prerogative to block a nominee that will make it difficult for her to get a vote on the floor.

At issue is the Trump administration's new policy on foster care implemented in South Carolina in late January allowing a federally funded faith-based organization to place children only with Christian families. The policy is being carried out by an office that Darling would oversee.

"I just feel very strongly that I have an obligation to comment on one of the most wrongheaded, un-American policies the Trump administration has cooked up in the last two years," Wyden said. "Last month, the Department of Health and Human Services gave South Carolina the green light for discrimination in foster care programs — taxpayer-funded discrimination. What this means is that adults who can provide safe, loving and nurturing homes for foster kids are going to be denied that opportunity on religious grounds."

Wyden warned that a large cross-section of would-be foster parents

would be barred from caring for children: "People who are Jewish, people who are Catholic, people who are Muslim, people who choose to practice no religion at all, LGBTQ, potentially others. Under the Trump policy, they could legally become the victims of discrimination."

Sen. Tim Scott, R-S.C., who is a member of the committee, promoted the new policy, saying, "It is a great day for South Carolina, religious liberty, and all foster care kids across the Palmetto state. We should ensure that federal regulations do not discriminate against faith-based organizations like South Carolina's Miracle Hill that only seek to give thousands of children across our state a family and a place to call home."

Scott and Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., said Tuesday they wanted to work with Wyden over his concerns. Wyden said the policy change is "a terrible precedent."

The exemption the South Carolina agency was granted from federal nondiscrimination policy could potentially apply to other states such as Texas, which permits faith-based state-licensed child welfare agencies to refuse to place children and families with LGBT and same-sex couples.

Darling was nominated for the position last year and was approved unanimously by the panel, but she did not get a Senate floor vote. She was renominated in January.

She has had a long career in the nonprofit sector in Texas and Maryland and in 2001 was named by President George W. Bush to be director of the Center for Faith-based and Community Initiatives at the Department of Health and Human Services.

Other Texans that have run into confirmation trouble in recent years include Kathleen Hartnett White, whose nomination to be chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality was withdrawn last year by the White House after Democrats objected to her views on climate change as controversial and out of the mainstream. Also, former Texas Comptroller Susan Combs was not confirmed by the Senate in 2017 or 2018 to be an assistant secretary of the Interior Department but is serving in an acting capacity. She has again been renominated to the position.