

## SB 238 Signing Remarks, 6.21.06

Good morning, and thank you all for coming. My name is Crystal Ward Allen, and I am the Executive Director of Public Children Services Association of Ohio. Representing the 88 county child protection agencies, I am VERY pleased to be here today, as we celebrate a new law that will assist us in connecting more “waiting” children, with permanent loving families.

Joining some of the usual suspects at these events – the Governor, members of the legislature, Directors of state and local agencies – we have some very special guests: all of these children and youth – they are wonderful additions to many lucky foster and adoptive families from various counties in Ohio – Fairfield, Franklin and Union (we also have some families and caseworkers with us). Thank you all for coming. You – the children - are why we are here today.

Last year at this time, we had about 2,700 children waiting for an adoptive family. Many have been adopted (I’m guessing around 2,000 – a majority adopted by their foster parents – a typical love story.) But some continue to wait. Plus, thousands of more children are in foster care, and for those children that can’t be returned to their birth family within a year or two, a judicial decision will be made to free them for adoption. Thus, Ohio is always in need of safe, loving families willing to foster and adopt.

I’ve recently met many amazing current or former foster care youth. Some are in foster care, some aged out of foster care, and some have been adopted. I have made it a point to listen to them. The first thing they’ve said, is that being placed in foster, kinship and adoptive homes saved their lives – and provided the safety, stability and opportunity they needed to find themselves, find success, basically, Rise Up and Move On. Of course, they also have many recommendations for improvements on the part

of child welfare agencies and the courts – we did ask after all. So, my organization has a lot more work to do...

But today, I want to celebrate our foster and adopted children and youth, as well as the thousands of foster, kinship and adoptive families that care for them. SB 238 does a wide number of things that I believe will help us protect children, and recruit, prepare and support families that will open their hearts and homes to raise these kids.

To back up Ohio's commitment to adoption, Governor Taft also recently signed an Executive Order that invests an additional \$5 M TANF funds to support Adoption recruitment, matching and placement activities, and \$2.5 M TANF funds to support Independent Living skills and activities for foster youth. Governor Taft, on behalf of the county child protection agencies, thank you for making this investment for Ohio's children and youth.

Now, it is my distinct pleasure to introduce an old friend, and an inspiring community advocate - Judge Yvette McGee Brown, now President of the Center for Child and Family Advocacy. Judge Brown has always been a strong voice for the rights of children, and families as well.

Our next speaker is John Saros, Director of Franklin County Children Services. I've known Director Saros for over a decade – he is passionate, and a dedicated child welfare leader for ensuring every waiting child has an adoptive family. FCCS's success in getting their waiting children placed into safe, stable adoptive homes is fairly phenomenal.

ODJFS Director Barbara Riley's career began in child welfare and her heart has never left it. She is one of the most thoughtful, compassionate and responsible public servants I have ever known, skilled at approaching a problem, designing a long term strategy, and having the ability and patience to achieve results. She is a close friend, as well.

Rick Smith is the Deputy Director of the Office for Children and Families at ODJFS. Partnering with Rick on child welfare and adoption issues is an honor, as his dedication and intentions for good government to support Ohio's children and families is always apparent. And that's good, as SB 238 will require a lot of partnering, for implementation of this new law.

Representative Jeff Wagner was the House sponsor of the Adoption Reform bill. Along with Senator Tom Niehaus, Rep. Wagner's leadership was always inspiring and clear. I look forward to future work with them both. At the outset of the process, Rep. Wagner clarified, that he had been a foster parent himself, and he wanted to make sure the final law would help recruit, prepare and support foster and adoptive parents, to raise and care for the children in their home. I believe he succeeded in that goal. Thank you for your leadership Representative Wagner.

Senator Tom Niehaus has shown tremendous leadership on this bill, and in our last biennial budget. He clearly has all the qualities desired in a policy maker – desire to serve and protect the children and citizens of Ohio, willingness to hear input and learn new information from all stakeholders, ability and wisdom to process that information and make a policy decision, and communicate his vision to his peers in the General Assembly. It is an honor to work with Sen. Niehaus.

Niehaus to intro Governor Taft...