

# **Senate Judiciary Committee**

## **Supportive Testimony for SB 66, Senator Kirk Schuring**

**by Crystal Ward Allen**

**April 27, 2004**

Good morning Chairman Austria and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. My name is Crystal Ward Allen, Executive Director of the Public Children Services Association of Ohio. PCSAO represents the 88 county public child protection agencies in Ohio. Our mission is to assure every child has a safe and stable family.

I am pleased to come before you and support SB 66, the Child Advocacy Center Bill. Child Advocacy Centers offer a coordinated system of handling complicated child abuse situations. Not only do they serve as hubs to coordinate the child welfare and forensic investigations, but also the law enforcement investigation, any criminal prosecution activities, medical evaluation and treatment, and other therapeutic treatment and support. The intense coordination of local multi-system teams result in a high level of success in handling these cases, and reduced trauma for the child victim.

Ohio Public Children Services Agencies that are fortunate enough to have a Child Advocacy Center in their county or region strongly support the value of these centers. While the public children services agencies investigate over 100,000 reports of abuse, neglect or dependency each year, those several thousand cases of sexual abuse, serious cases of physical abuse, and other complex cases are often more efficiently handled with a multi-system team. According to the Winter 2004 issue of *Children, Families and the Courts Ohio Bulletin* on Children's Advocacy Centers, local CACs serve over 5,000 children per year. Local protocols define the unique roles and responsibilities of various members in each county.

To assure SB 66 effectively works in all Ohio communities, and that the legislative language doesn't confuse publicly mandated roles for all reports of abuse, neglect and dependency, PCSAO requested two amendments to improve the bill, which I believe Senator Schuring will be offer, following testimony today. I strongly request your support of these amendments:

- LSC 125 0448-2, SC 4 – This amendment will delete all language confusing the Public Children Services Agency (PCSA) statutory mandate to receive and investigate/assess all reports of child abuse and neglect. The mandate remains with the PCSA, but permissively allows communities that have a Child Advocacy Center, to enter into an interagency agreement to define investigative roles and responsibilities among CAC members. This will support community strengths and opportunities for multi-system cooperation, while clearly maintaining the PCSA responsibility to receive, investigate and complete other activities associated with child abuse and neglect.
  
- LSC 125 0448-2 SC 3 – This amendment removes the term “severe physical abuse” and replaces it with “other types of abuse specified in the memorandum of understanding”. PCSAO supports this change for two important reasons:
  - 1) Communities should be able to locally define which cases to consistently have a multi-system review, based on local capacity and strengths.
  - 2) Ohio Supreme Court Chief Justice Tom Moyer has recently appointed a Subcommittee on Child Abuse and Neglect to review Ohio law and state rules regarding child abuse and neglect, and make recommendations for improvement. Current law across civil and criminal courts is not well harmonized, and has resulted in a wide spectrum of case law and child welfare practice. The committee, is comprised of Judges, child welfare directors, local prosecutors, physicians, families, and other key parties, and is scheduled to complete its work in October, 2005. PCSAO requests the General Assembly hold off on any new definitions of child abuse, neglect and dependency until this committee can complete its work.

PCSAO would like to thank Senator Schuring and his aid David Monder for their work and leadership on this bill, as well as to thank the Ohio Network of Child Advocacy Centers and Director Ben Murray for their wonderful work supporting CAC development throughout Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this bill. I would be happy to respond to any questions.