

**Health Committee
House of Representatives**

**Supportive Testimony
HB 225, Representative Lynn Olman, Sponsor
Crystal Ward Allen, Executive Director**

October 15, 2003

Chair Jollivette, members of the Committee, my name is Crystal Ward Allen and I am the Executive Director of the Public Children Services Association of Ohio. PCSAO represents the 88 public child protection agencies here in Ohio, working for safe children, stable families and supportive communities. I am pleased to appear before you today to state the Public Children Services Association of Ohio's support of HB 225, the Mental Health Parity Bill.

Too many families are unable to access quality, appropriate services for their children and youth experiencing mental illness. Many of these families have private insurance with good physical health coverage, but with minimal, inadequate behavioral health coverage. Most private insurance policies have vastly different treatment of physical and behavioral health care – higher co-pays, and fewer outpatient or in-patient days.

Thus, when their children's mental health problems are severe, many of these families are faced with severe choices to access the treatment they need. Do they delay services until their child is experiencing failure in school, the community, perhaps poses a danger to themselves and others? Do these families mortgage their home? Lose their job?

Each year, many children involved with the child welfare system experience mental health problems. They have been abused, neglected, abandoned, rejected. Parents and caregivers often have mental health issues that put their children at a health or safety risk. A recent federal review of Ohio's child welfare

system, the US Department of Health and Human Services Child and Family Services Review, cited inaccessibility and unavailability of mental health services for children and their families, as a clear deficiency here in Ohio. For many of these children and families, their safety and ongoing stability in a permanent family – birth, relative or adoptive – depends upon access to mental health services.

In addition to the abused, neglected and dependent children needing mental health services, there are many families for whom abuse, neglect or dependency is not an issue, but their child's serious mental illness is. Too often, these families have exhausted their minimal behavioral health benefits, they are ineligible for mental health coverage thru the community Medicaid system, and the local mental health boards struggle to provide the services needed. Often, problems escalate until the family is in crisis. Too many of these families are then referred to Public Children Services Agencies to seek placement, or their children end up in the juvenile justice system. As clearly found in recent federal GAO reports, neither of these systems is designed to address children's mental health needs, and the financial drain shifts available resources from child safety issues.

Mental Health Parity legislation would help many families access appropriate mental health needs in a timely manner, before the crisis escalates. While it will not solve all of our behavioral healthcare challenges, it would be a critical piece.

In summary, PCSAO strongly supports HB 225. We would like to publicly thank Representative Olman for his continued dedication to this important issue, and request the full General Assembly support this bill. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to respond to any questions at this time.