



**House Community and Family Advancement Committee**

**Proponent Testimony on HB126**

**May 17, 2017**

**Mary Wachtel, Director of Public Policy**

**Public Children Services Association of Ohio**

**37 W. Broad Street, Suite 1100**

**Columbus, OH 43215**

[mary@pcsao.org](mailto:mary@pcsao.org)

**614.224.5802**

Chair Ginter, Vice-Chair Conditt, Ranking Member Boyd and Members of the Committee, my name is Mary Wachtel and I am with the Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO). PCSAO is a membership driven association of Ohio's county Public Children Services Agencies that advocates for and promotes child protection program excellence and sound public policy for safe children, stable families and supportive communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 126. We applaud Representatives Boyd and Rezabek for their leadership on behalf of kinship caregivers.

I will focus my brief remarks on the important role that kinship caregivers play in caring for their relative children and why this legislation is important. My colleagues, Tim Harless and Patrick Donovan, will focus more specifically on services that kinship caregivers need, including navigation.

Grandparents, other relatives, and close family friends step up every day to raise children whose parents can no longer care for them—sometimes on a temporary basis, often on a long-term or permanent basis. This longstanding tradition, known as kinship care, helps protect children and maintains strong family, community and cultural connections. When children cannot remain safely with their parents, other family and friends can provide a sense of security, identity and belonging.

The majority of children living in kinship families have no children services involvement. Census data show that over 100,660 Ohio grandparents are raising grandchildren in our state (2014); many more children are being raised by relatives other than grandparents.

Ohio's county public children services agencies (PCSAs) also depend on kin to care for abused and neglected children. This is especially true now that we are in the throes of an opiate crisis and seeing more and more children come into contact with children services because of parental drug abuse.

For PCSAs, kinship placements can be "formal", meaning a child in agency custody is placed with an approved kinship caregiver as opposed to a foster home or a group home. Twenty-one percent (almost 2900) of the 13,719 children in custody statewide on July 1, 2016 were living with kinship caregivers.

Many more Ohio children who come to the attention of the child protective services system are diverted from entering agency custody by being placed with kin as an alternative to foster care. We typically call this "informal" kinship because the agency does not hold custody. While we do not know the precise number of informal kin placements, it is widely believed to exceed the number of formal kin placements.

Regardless of how children come to be placed with kin, kinship care provides them with a sense of stability, identity and belonging, especially during times of crisis. Imagine a child who must

be removed from her mother – the trauma and loss that go along with that separation. Now imagine the difference for that child if she is leaving her mother’s home to go live with her grandmother or aunt, versus going to live in a foster home with a new family she has never met.

Kinship families value the rewards of caregiving, but many also experience hardship by taking on the full-time care of additional children. Census data show that kinship caregivers are more likely to be poor, single, older, less educated, and unemployed than families in which at least one parent is present.<sup>1</sup> This means that meaningful support is critical to helping maintain children with kinship families.

Many kinship caregivers do not know what helps and support are available. HB126 would help remedy that by establishing a statewide kinship navigator program to provide guidance, information and referral, and help obtaining services for which these caregivers are eligible. I can personally attest to the value of such a program as PCSAO receives frequent phone calls from kinship families who are struggling to care for the child or children they have taken in. Many of these families that I talk to do not know where to turn for help and are struggling. They want to keep doing the right thing and need help.

Due to limited resources, only a handful of counties currently provide any type of kinship navigation services. This legislation would ensure that such assistance is available throughout Ohio. We do have one request for amending the bill and that is to include language to establish an advisory group to work with ODJFS as they design and implement the program. There is great collective wisdom and experience throughout our state on working with kinship caregivers, within county PCSAs as well as within other partner organizations and entities. Ensuring that wisdom is at the table as the program is being developed is essential.

---

<sup>1</sup> Population Reference Bureau’s analysis of the 2009, 2010, and 2011 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Surveys.

We thank Rep.'s Boyd and Rezabek for bringing this legislation forward and look forward to working with them and you for successful passage.

Thank you and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Chair Ginter, Vice Chair Conditt, Ranking member Boyce and members of the committee,

My name is Tim Harless and I am the director of community outreach and programming for Richland County Children Services in north central Ohio.

A native of Mansfield, I have worked in child welfare for almost 28 years in a variety of capacities.

I am here today as a strong advocate for Kinship caregivers. Not only in Ohio, but nationally, as well. I am currently the co-president of the Ohio Grandparent Kinship Coalition and the lead for the Protect Ohio IV-E waiver Kinship strategy.

I would like to echo Mary's comments recognizing Representatives Boyd and Rezabeck for their support of Kinship families across the state of Ohio.

I do not need to repeat Mary's testimony. But I strongly believe Kinship families deserve and need our attention and support.

The fact is national studies demonstrate children are just as safe living with Kinship families as they are in traditional foster homes. I will also submit to you a document that shows how these non-traditional families are beneficial to children, and also to local child welfare agencies and the community as a whole.

During my almost three decades in child welfare, I have had the privilege to speak at several state conferences around Ohio.

I am consistently amazed at the number of Kinship care providers I encounter who are not aware of the benefits for which they may be eligible.

There should be community mapping done in every Ohio county. These would provide Kinship care families a tool to identify all available resources. Secondly, a 1-800 warm line would give every Kinship family a contact person in their own county to assist with other questions that may arise.

These are just some of the reasons I strongly support H.B. 126. I thank all of you for the opportunity to advocate for Ohio's Kinship families.

During my career working with families and children, I have seen how Kinship families may struggle in other states. I am continually reminded that Ohio is one of the best in providing positive services to empower families, both traditional and non-traditional.

I would welcome the opportunity to answer any questions the committee may have at this point.

Thank you.

TESTIMONY OF  
PATRICK A. DONAVAN  
REGARDING HB 126 - REGION BASED KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAM  
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY AND FAMILY ADVANCEMENT  
OF THE  
OHIO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
MAY 17, 2017

Good afternoon Chairman Ginter, Vice-Chair Conditt, Ranking Member Boyd and members of the Committee. My name is Patrick Donovan, and I am the Kinship Supervisor for Muskingum County Adult and Child Protective Services. I also sit on the Board of Directors for the "Ohio Grandparent-Kinship Coalition". I am a past member of the "Ohio Department of Job and Family Services" Kinship Advisory Board. I have presented at the local, state, and national levels regarding kinship and its importance. Through my service in these capacities, I have had the opportunity to work with 1000's of Ohio's kinship families one-on-one. I have been in their homes, and sat next to them at court. As recently as Monday, I spoke with a child who is now 21 years old, pursuing college, and unfortunately calling me to report the abuse of her siblings. Her grandmother raised her because her parents struggle with substance abuse. I have been able to assist kinship caregivers in multiple counties when their home county does not have a Kinship Navigator. These kinship family's lives take a 180 turn when they take in multiple children. Often times they have only minutes to make the decision that can affect them for many, many, years. Yet they still take on this full-time responsibility. They deal with the children's emotional crises from not being able to be with parents. They take on significant added expense from daycare, to food, to utilities, to beds and school fees. They also have to deal with the biological parents that are often their own children.

It has been my experience that the handful of counties that do have navigators, often can't stretch their resources across the State. This results in countless kinship families not being able to take advantage of programs that already exist. This in turn, results in children being placed into foster care because the kinship caregivers are unable to navigate the system.

In Ohio, kinship caregivers provide safety and stability for over 200,000 of our children. In a medium sized county like Muskingum, that number is well over 1200. Without these caregivers, these children would be languishing in foster care. Our agency is experiencing involvement with increasing numbers of sibling groups, some as large as 9. Keeping siblings together in foster care is becoming increasingly difficult. These children are more comfortable with grandma or “aunt”, and are ultimately more successful in life, and experience less trauma. It also maintains family and culture. Opioids are only making this reality even more imperative as Ohio’s foster homes are currently being pushed to their limits.

I have served in every officer position with the “Ohio Grandparent-Kinship Coalition”, and have been active with the Coalition since 2004. Over the last 13 years, you hear one common theme from caregivers and professionals--- There is an incredible need for navigators in every county. Budgetarily, this is not realistic. However, a regionalized kinship navigator system, would allow counties that don’t have Kinship Navigators to have a point person that could guide them in the direction they need, to ensure that the children in their care, are provided for, and safe.

Muskingum County is part of “*ProtectOhio*” which is a Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project, which includes 15 counties. “*ProtectOhio*” has shown consistent success with supporting kinship caregivers since 1996. It clearly shows the benefits of kinship care. Counties that utilize the kinship strategy have less children in foster care than in comparison to control counties. In Muskingum County, and others, the Kinship Navigator program is the key concept behind our success in keeping children safe and out of foster care.

Thank you Chairman Ginter and Members of the House Community and Family Advancement Committee for the opportunity to offer sponsor testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions.