



## HIGHLAND COUNTY JOB & FAMILY SERVICES

Child Support Enforcement Agency  
Public Children Services Agency

Ohio House of Representatives  
Children and Human Services Committee  
Testimony on HB 96

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Good morning, Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett and distinguished members of the House Children and Human Services Committee. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to share testimony with you regarding HB96. My name is Jeremy Ratcliff and I am director of Highland County Job and Family Services (HCJFS) in southwestern Ohio. HCJFS is a triple combined agency with public assistance programs, child support enforcement and social services including child protective services. I have worked in the field of human services for four (4) years after working twenty (20) years in the adult criminal justice system, mostly in probation supervision and services.

From my time in community corrections, I was peripherally aware of the funding challenges experienced by Highland County Child Protective Services. Not until June 2021, when I became director, could I begin to fully grasp the magnitude. During that time the local system was on the verge of total collapse with low staffing levels, increased number of children in care with higher more complex needs, strained relationships with stakeholders, and ever rising costs.

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In 2018 Highland County Children Services had 190 children in custody and 297 separate placements for those children due to disruptions or returning to care. By 2024, these numbers rose to 282 children in custody and 440 separate placements. Each time a placement disrupts, further trauma is inflicted on the child, and often subsequent placements become harder to find, increasing the likelihood of the child having to sleep in the office.

In 2018 placement costs for Highland County were approximately \$1.8 million. By 2024, costs rose to approximately \$4.3 million, nearly a 140% increase in just six years. As costs have continued to rise, we have diverted all possible funds from other programs and services to survive. In addition to fully maximizing the State Child Protection Allocation (SCPA) each year, other state and federal funding sources have a reduced impact in the community due to diverting funds to child protective services. We cannot fully utilize federal Title XX funding for supports to senior citizens for example, as a result of placement costs. The majority of Federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds are expended for services and supports to families involved with child protective services. We are unable to develop a robust TANF program, targeting workforce supports or stabilize a short term family in crisis, due to the needs of the child welfare unit. The repeated failure to replace/renew a long-time levy has led to a general fund budget request to the Highland County Commissioners of \$1.5 million for 2025, approximately 9.5% of the total general fund budget for Highland County. This is not sustainable for most counties.

In my previous position I have figuratively pounded on the desk of the Highland County Commissioners, stating "you can't cut my budget at probation because Children Services can't control theirs!" Then County Commissioner, now State Senator Shane Wilkin would respond "Jeremy, you just don't understand." I understand now. For the first time in my career, I am unable to control expenses. PCSAs do not take custody

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of children, we are ordered custody, and we cannot say no. Nor can we ignore the calls for reports of abuse/neglect/dependency. One recent call resulted in a sibling group of three entering care, each child was \$500/day, totaling \$45,000/month for the sibling group.

As children diverted from other systems enter foster care, the demand for scarce beds pushes costs higher and higher. Because we cannot say no, we are required to find placement or risk children sleeping in the office, which happens at an alarming rate across the state. The real possibility of children sleeping in the office places an undue burden on caseworkers as they are already processing very difficult circumstances. I have observed caseworkers making frantic calls to coordinate care for their own children as they prepare to sleep in the office with children in custody of the agency. Twenty-four-hour weekend schedules with mandatory 12-hour shifts have been developed with the prospect of a violent 17 yr. old arriving at the office with the only available placement at the time quoted at \$1,775/day. Fortunately, we secured a last minute placement in partnership with the Highland County Board of Developmental Disabilities. However, other children have not been so fortunate and have been forced to sleep in our offices until we secured placement. The first overnight happened within months of my tenure as director. I will never forget the words of the supervisor preparing to sleep in her desk chair with the child on a makeshift cot, "Welcome to child welfare boss, this is what we do." This cannot and should not ever be accepted as "what we do."

I ask for your full consideration and support for the additional investments in the child welfare system at the local level to assist struggling agencies trying to survive. As importantly, I ask you to remember the words of a local foster child I will call Molly. Recently, six-year-old Molly was in our office for the third time in approximately six months due to a caretaker's inability to provide for her needs. Over the next eight hours as the Placement Coordinator desperately searched for a suitable placement, Molly said, "I really want to go back

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to (previous foster parent's) house. But if I can't, I know that you will find a safe place where I will be loved. I trust you."

Members of this Committee, this is what I am asking you to invest in – a safe place where children will be loved. There is no higher funding priority. Thank you for this opportunity and for your time and consideration.

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