



HIGHLAND COUNTY JOB & FAMILY SERVICES

Child Support Enforcement Agency
Public Children Services Agency

Ohio Senate
Health Committee
Testimony on HB 96

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Good morning, Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Liston and distinguished members of the Senate Health 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.

The increased investments in the State Child Protection Allocation and establishment of regional child wellness campuses you just heard about are critical to helping public children services agencies in the state manage the placement crisis. Just as importantly, HB96 includes a policy change to provide consistency and transparency to placement rates (Sec. 5101.141 and Sec. 5101.145). , As a local director, I see firsthand why this policy change is needed. In my previous position as director of adult probation, 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

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unable to control expenses. PCSAs do not take custody 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. We have reached a point where there is no apparent predictability or logic to per diem costs charged for residential and group home placement, or to the add-on costs such as one-on-one coverage that some providers require for kids with challenging behaviors. Often placement coordinators are choosing between a child sleeping in the office or accepting a rate of \$800, \$1,000, \$1,200 or even higher per day. Frequently we are not provided with justification for the quoted rate and are not able to ascertain what services are included for varying levels of care. As one staff member recently told me, the process of finding suitable placement with a transparent rate is “absolutely insane,” especially for higher-need children. For example, when looking at additional staff supervision of a child, a recent survey that PCSAO conducted showed a provider charged a county contiguous to mine \$150 and another county in a different part of the state \$343 for the same service. This is why the proposed policy is absolutely needed; it will modernize Ohio’s method for determining reasonable costs, while also providing transparency and consistency to the process of securing placement for our children.

In closing, I ask for your full consideration and support for the proposed policy initiative and the additional investments in the child welfare system at the local level to assist struggling agencies trying to survive. Let’s not lose sight of the people amid the politics. People like a local foster child I will call Emily. Emily, who will soon be 17 years old, has been in agency custody since age 7. Through multiple residential programs, foster

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homes and failed adoption attempts, Emily is currently in her 26th placement since the age of 7. Recently while Emily was in our office awaiting transportation to her 26th placement, she expressed how lonely and afraid she often is. But on this day, she felt so much better because she was surrounded by our staff members, even telling us that “we are her people,” mostly the only people that she considers to be her family. On this day, Emily committed to “try to do better” in hopes that she might someday be able to return to a former foster parent’s home. On this day...Emily didn’t feel lonely and scared. On this day Emily had a sliver of hope in her eye as the 16-year-old headed off to her 26th placement setting nearly three hours away.

Members of this committee, there can be no higher funding priority or policy initiative than to provide a sliver of hope to a child for a better life. I am asking that you partner with us to provide that hope to Ohio’s children. Thank you for this opportunity, and I will be happy to answer any questions you might have.

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