



STATE SENATOR
CHARLETA B. TAVARES

15TH DISTRICT

Sponsor Testimony
Presented by: Senator Charleta B. Tavares
Senate Bill 30
Community and Family Advancement Committee
Representative Derickson, Chair
Tuesday, June 2, 2015

Good afternoon, Chairman Derickson, Ranking Member Howse and members of the Community and Family Advancement Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present Senate Bill 30 which is designed to establish the Ohio Family Stability Commission. It has been well established through scholarly research and analysis that the disintegration of the traditional family unit has contributed to escalating rates of poverty and a wide-range of pathological social conditions. Research shows that children born into intact married parent families are more likely to thrive economically, socially and psychologically.¹ What we are witnessing today is a general acceptance of children being born out-of-wedlock, ever-increasing rates of teenage pregnancy, divorce and the associated risks of poverty

¹ <http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/human-services/child-poverty-rates-and-family-structure.aspx>

and abuse that are too often attendant to unstable families. These issues have been ignored and passively addressed for far too long. As a consequence, the taxpayers of Ohio and the affected families have had to pay in numerous ways for our collective neglect and apathy.

It should be said from the outset that single parents who are raising their children to be well-adjusted, contributing citizens should be heartily commended. It is extremely difficult for single parent households to raise and care for children properly today. While being a single parent should not be encouraged as a preferred manner of family life; it should not be condemned either. If it were not for the unwavering commitment, sacrifice, and determination of many single parents (mothers in particular) the pathological conditions so often associated with fatherless homes would be even more prevalent than they are now.

It is the goal of the Ohio Family Stability Commission to reduce the number of single parent households in our state and make recommendations for addressing the numerous challenges which more

often than not accompany such family units. In addition to the well-known economic factors negatively impacting single-parent households there are many less talked about realities that affect children in such families. The lack of confidence, anger, unworthiness, distrust, low esteem, disrespect and substance abuse disproportionately impact children from fatherless homes. We observe negative behaviors from the children and attribute them to personality and environment rather than the deep seated causal factors that are internalized and suppressed. Our approach to addressing the serious concerns must be extremely thoughtful and sensitive. Above all, the Ohio Family Stability Commission will not engage in negative stereotyping or well-intentioned strategies which, if not properly developed could have the effect of undermining the strong foundation and positive efforts of many single parents.

Many “leaders” have concluded that there is little that we can do to address these difficult family-life issues. I beg to disagree. We have outlined a comprehensive approach in this legislation which will engage policymakers, the faith-based community, the media, non-

profit and philanthropic organizations. The work of the Ohio Family Stability Commission has been carefully planned over a four-year time frame with the outcome being practical, achievable and measurable results.

LOCAL INITIATIVE: INFORMATION & RECOMMENDATIONS

To spearhead the family stability effort, a one-day statewide conference was organized in October of 2009. I along with other elected officials, professionals and pastors participated on the Family Stability Commission Steering Committee. The conference resulted in a report that featured specific recommendations on the issues of divorce rates, non-marital births, child custody, child welfare, and domestic violence. Bishop Timothy Clarke and Pastor Richard Nathan have collaborated with our planning team to offer recommendations which include the following:

- Require every couple seeking to be married to receive premarital counseling.

- Reduce the number of impulsive marriages by requiring a 30-day waiting period.
- Create incentives to get people into premarital counseling (a state marriage license would cost \$20 for those who get counseling and \$100 for those who do not).
- Establish braking mechanisms or time-outs for couples who are thinking about splitting up but have children under 18. The marriage contract should at least be as difficult to break as a contract for lawn-care services.
- Legislate much more stringent requirements for divorce whenever children are involved.
- Encourage the government to use its considerable resources and influence to raise the awareness of the importance of fatherhood.
- Develop an advertising campaign with well-crafted messages to youth and adults aimed at reducing out-of-wedlock births.
- Strengthen the media images that reinforce strong two-parent families and develop messaging that supports strong family relationships as well as communicates the availability of

community resources.

- Begin domestic violence prevention programs that empower girls (and adults) at an earlier age through the use of a K-12 curriculum for teachers and students.

CONTENT AND OPERATION

The commission shall consist of 25 commissioners who have expertise in the following areas: non-marital births, marital divorce, education, employment, child support, child custody, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, judicial system, criminal justice, faith-based initiatives, philanthropic and non-profit organizations, and communications.

The Ohio Family Stability Commission will conduct research to firmly establish a baseline for the issues that are to be confronted. The commissioners and staff will work with legislators to: create appropriate policy; work with the media to disseminate messages that combat the behavior and attitudes that foster these conditions;

cooperate with non-profit and philanthropic organizations to create a unified grassroots effort; and assist in implementing the policy recommendations that are developed. For many decades, state and local governments have been combating the disintegration of the family through part-time and splintered efforts. If a concerted effort is put forth over a protracted period of time, then real substantial and permanent changes can be made.

While some may fear that we as a state cannot afford to address the issues of family instability at this time, I firmly believe that we cannot afford to not address these issues. The state of Ohio spends over \$15 billion annually on public assistance services that tend to social issues that are in many ways the repercussions of single-parent homes and absent fathers. For example, Medicaid funding alone accounts for \$18.1 billion in FY 2016 and \$19.1 billion in FY 2017 and approximately 50% of the state of Ohio budget. This is more than any other program, including the executive budget proposal of \$11.6 billion in FY 2016 and \$12.1 billion in FY 2017 for ODE on primary, secondary and higher education combined. Further examples of

exorbitant expenditures include: \$231 million budgeted on incarcerated youth with the Department of Youth Services for FY 2016 and \$226 million for FY 2017; \$1.3 billion spent annually on Health and Human Services.

CONCLUSION

I am keenly aware of the fact that the majority of American families are not directly experiencing the challenging social consequences presented in this testimony. However, we are all affected and we all share in the financial costs associated with family instability. We must be careful not to lend credence to stereotyping a whole class of individuals based on race, gender, geography, familial status or any other indicator. It is often too convenient and simplistic to deal with the pathological side of family life, for poor and minority classes of individuals, as an acceptable response or strategy for addressing serious structural and systemic issues.

The financial challenges with which we are faced in the state of Ohio

can be directly tied to the issues I have mentioned in this testimony. The increasing costs of state programs and initiatives associated with subsidizing families who cannot fully support themselves are becoming unsustainable in Ohio. Again, we as a state have not directly addressed the issue of family instability; rather we have focused our attention on treating the disparities of multigenerational single parenting and poverty as mere symptoms. It is imperative that the leaders of this state act without fear to directly address these fundamental issues. We cannot afford to persistently engage in the same attitudes and behaviors that have brought us to this very point.

The Ohio Family Stability Commission would not condemn single-parents; it would create practical solutions that will help to permanently reduce non-marital births and the proven negative outcomes that are disproportionately associated with family instability. It is my hope that the state of Ohio and members of the General Assembly recognize how serious the lack of family stability should be taken. The bill is not the “be all or end all,” but it does provide an initial framework to allow us to address this multifaceted issue in a

practical and organized manner.

This bill passed the Senate by a 32-1 vote.

Chairman Derickson and members of the Committee, I appreciate your attention to this issue and I respectfully request your favorable consideration and passage of Senate Bill 30. Thank you and I am happy to respond to questions from the committee.