



Ohio Family Care Association
"The Voice of Ohio Resource Families"

**Ohio House of Representatives Community and Family Advancement Committee
House Bill 126 - Proponent Testimony
May 17, 2017**

Chairman Ginter, Vice Chair Conditt, Ranking Member Boyd, and members of the Ohio House Community and Family Advancement Committee: my name is Denise St. Clair, and I am president of the Ohio Family Care Association (OFCA), an Ohio non-profit organization that serves and strengthens families caring for Ohio's most vulnerable children.

OFCA brings together Ohio resource families (adoptive, foster, kinship, and respite), birth or primary families, child-caring agency personnel, and interested others to promote the best interests of children, youth, and families who have been touched by Ohio's child welfare and other child-serving systems. OFCA uniquely understands the dynamics specific to each family structure and believes that inclusion of the family voice in decision-making leads to long-lasting positive impacts in the lives of children. On behalf of OFCA, I thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of Ohio House Bill 126, which will provide much needed support and services for kin caring for children.

I know from my personal experience how important this legislation is. Eight years ago, three days before Christmas, my 11-year-old grandson came to live with me. Prior to that, I had provided intermittent care and, for a brief period, he was in my court-ordered temporary custody. Although I knew there was a possibility that he would come to live with me at some point, the move, although welcome, was sudden and precipitated by a family crisis – a familiar scenario in kinship cases. Despite having worked for many years in the child welfare field, I was overwhelmed with the many issues that had to be immediately dealt with. I was fortunate, however, to be familiar with the various options for kin caregivers in Ohio and to have resources to assist with the many arrangements, filings, and applications that needed to be made.

Most kin families are not as fortunate and may not have connections to help and support them during a very difficult time. For too many kinship caregivers, the trauma to the child and the family of a change in caregivers is compounded by the confusing processes and legal requirements associated with establishing kinship legal status, and the differences among the services and financial supports available under each status. House Bill 126 responds to this need through a kinship navigator-based system of support, information, and resources for kin families when they are most vulnerable.

The type of help envisioned in House Bill 126 is sorely needed by the kin families OFCA serves. Only last week a call came in from a grandmother whose grandchildren had been placed with her from another county. The grandmother was employed, but her pay could not be stretched far enough to cover child care expenses. Before calling OFCA, she had spent hours talking to her own county agency and the

agency that placed the children in relation to her options and needed financial resources, without finding the answers she needed.

If House Bill 126 is enacted, this grandmother, and other kinship caregivers like her, will benefit immeasurably from mandated information and referral services and assistance in obtaining supportive services, including, potentially, access to publicly funded child care, respite care, training for in caring for children with special needs, legal services, and access to a toll-free number for additional assistance. Most important, this measure provides for a network of kinship navigators who can guide and support caregivers through a maze of options, processes, and decisions.

According to recent reports, there are about 100,000 grandparents raising their grandchildren in Ohio today. Added to that number are other kinship caregivers – aunts, uncles, siblings, family friends—who are caring for children in various types of placements when their own parents cannot care for them. This number is increasing, and will continue to increase, due to the opioid epidemic in Ohio. Support for kin caregivers is more important now than ever before.

OFCA congratulates the sponsors of House Bill 126 for providing a well-reasoned strategy for supporting the interests of all members of the family circle – parents, caregivers, and the children they care for. We urge the Committee to support House Bill 126.

Respectfully submitted,

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