



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

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.¹ 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.

¹ 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.