

WITNESS INFORMATION FORM

Please complete the Witness Information Form before testifying:

Date: June 19, 2018

Name: ZOE BROWN WOOD, MSW PHD

Are you representing: Yourself Organization

Organization (If Applicable): _____

Position/Title: _____

Address: 2842 Lee Rd

City: Shaker Heights State: OH Zip: 44120

Best Contact Telephone: 216 368 2689 Email: ZBW @ CASE.EDU

Do you wish to be added to the committee notice email distribution list? Yes No

Business before the committee

Legislation (Bill/Resolution Number): HB 448

Specific Issue: Maintaining SIBLING Connections

Are you testifying as a: Proponent Opponent Interested Party

Will you have a written statement, visual aids, or other material to distribute? Yes No

(If yes, please send an electronic version of the documents, if possible, to the Chair's office prior to committee. You may also submit hard copies to the Chair's staff prior to committee.)

How much time will your testimony require? _____

WRITTEN ONLY

Please provide a brief statement on your position:

*Maintaining SIBLING connections
post adoption protects the rights
of children.*

Please be advised that this form and any materials (written or otherwise) submitted or presented to this committee are records that may be requested by the public and may be published online.

HB 448
Proponent Testimony
Zoe Breen Wood, MSW, PhD
Jack, Joseph & Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences
Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, OH

Chairman Ginter, Ranking Member Boyd and members of the House Community and Family Advancement Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present both my personal and professional views on HB 448. Thank you also to Representatives Boyd and LaTourette for your leadership on this issue. I apologize that I could not appear before you in person but hope that you will take the time to read this written testimony.

My name is Dr. Zoe Breen Wood and I believe I am uniquely qualified to present a perspective on the proposed legislation. I started social work my career over 40 years ago knocking on doors in a rural Virginia community investigating allegations of abuse and neglect. I am currently an Associate Professor at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences where I teach clinical courses in trauma, child welfare, and adoption; my own research focuses on factors that contribute to the development of attachment for children adopted from the public child welfare system; and my husband and I are the adoptive parents of a sibling group of three daughters who were 11, 9, and 4 when they came to our family. They are currently 35, 33, and 27. I have seen firsthand the benefits of maintaining sibling connections and have also witnessed the damage that can be done when those connections are severed.

As you know from your own lives, our relationships with our siblings are the longest lasting relationships we are likely to have. Our siblings are there to help us learn basic life skills from sharing, to caring for ourselves and others, to conflict resolution. They also help us carry the memories of our childhoods, helping separate truth from fantasy, and are crucial in our identity formation.

While sibling relationships are always powerful, they carry a special importance for youngsters who grow up in families impacted by trauma. Siblings often become the safe attachment figure where the parents or other caretakers are abusive or neglectful. They turn to each other for safety, for stability, for understanding, and to help them make sense of their worlds. Siblings with trauma histories learn to rely on and care for each other when the adults around them fail to carry out their responsibilities. The research tells us that when siblings are separated, they worry about each other and have additional challenges with attaching to a new family if they are not permitted to have knowledge or contact with each other. We also know that when youngsters from these backgrounds reach the age to search, the first and most frequent person with whom they wish contact are their other brothers and sisters. Especially for children who were abused or neglected, reuniting with siblings is more desirable and less threatening than connecting with other birth family members.

While the courts and child welfare agencies state they have a policy of *trying* to place siblings together, the language in HB 448 will *require* that reasonable efforts be made to place siblings together or, if that is not possible, to facilitate ongoing communication and contact among the siblings. This does not preclude using clinical judgment to make a decision in that is in a particular child's best interest but it does require sibling placement and ongoing contact always be the first option and does not allow agencies and families to rule it out for factors of convenience. It also acknowledges that efforts to facilitate ongoing contact is a separate but equal duty of placing agencies. As I often tell my students,

“adoption is a process, not an event” and the responsibility of professionals to continue to provide support to persons touched by adoption does not cease with the adoption decree.

I have been stunned to learn that one argument against this bill is that “it would have a chilling effect on adoption”. When you hear this argument, I urge you to ask where is the evidence to support this assertion. While it is true that placing siblings together and facilitating ongoing contact may require additional efforts and resources, it does not negate the fact that such efforts are always in the child’s best interest and support their rights.

Yes, agencies may be inconvenienced by having to find families to take groups of children, but children have a right to be placed together.

Yes, agencies may have to expend resources to facilitate ongoing communication between siblings who are not placed together, but children have a right to know that their brothers and sisters are safe, and to be able to continue to share experiences.

Yes, adoptive parents may have to stretch outside of their comfort zones to maintain contact with families who are different, but children have a right to expect their parents to do all they can to provide for their best interests.

I would like to close by sharing some of the experiences from our own family’s journey.

As I said, our daughters were 11, 9 and 4 when they joined our family. They had the benefit of growing up with others who looked like them and who could validate their history. Our two older daughters could see with their own eyes that their little sister was safe and cared for. They had the benefit of maintaining their relative birth order in their new family and learned to work through sibling squabbles within the context of a lifelong relationship. Today, they remain close to each other and to us. Our two oldest daughters share an apartment as they pursue their careers; our family has spent every Christmas together even when some of us need to travel long distances; we have developed and treasure many family traditions, including some that have come from their family of origin.

Our daughters do have two other siblings however. First, they have a sister who is between our first and second daughters in birth order. She was placed in a different adoptive family where it was felt she could receive better care for her high special needs. Unfortunately, their sister’s adoptive family has not allowed us to maintain contact. Her adoptive mother feels the visits are too stressful because her daughter gets upset when she sees her sisters and then has to leave. The other mother also won’t respond to requests for letters, pictures or phone calls so our girls have had no information for over the last 15 years. Frankly at this point, we do not know if this sister is even alive. Our daughters continue to worry about their sister and have asked if there is any way they can force the adoptive mother to at least respond to their pleas for information. Because their sister has intellectual limitations, she cannot initiate contact independently. If HB 488 were law in the State of Ohio, our daughters would have the right to petition the courts to know how she is doing.

Our daughter’s last sibling was born to their parents after the girls were removed from their birth home. That sibling has remained with their birth mother. When our daughters learned of this sibling’s existence, they asked to meet them, in their words “just to see if ____ is OK”. After the reunion, one of our daughter’s said, “Gee Mom and Dad, _____, is a pretty neat kid. Can we adopt them?”

Ladies and gentlemen, I urge you to support HB 448. Speaking from both personal and professional experience, I know that maintaining sibling connections supports children's positive growth and development and is in their best interests. This is not an issue of the rights of birth parents vs adoptive parents; it is a matter of the rights of children. Please do all you can to protect those rights.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. If I can provide you with additional information, I would welcome the opportunity to do so. I can best be reached at zbw@case.edu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Zoë Breen Wood". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Zoë" being particularly prominent.

Zoë Breen Wood, MSW, PhD

Associate Professor

Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School

of Applied Social Sciences

Case Western Reserve University