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Chairman Ryan and members of the Finance Committee:

My name is Phylene Thomas. I am here representing the Northern Ohioans for Budget Legislation Equality (NOBLE). I am a resource specialist for the East End Neighborhood House in Cleveland, Ohio, where I frequently help assist kinship care parents. For the past six years I have also served as a kinship care parent.

As both a kinship care parent and someone who serves as an advocate for kinship caregivers, I have observed the lack of understanding of what it means to be a kinship caregiver, and what is needed when one agrees to be a kinship care provider.

The first instinct of most who become kinship care providers is to take care of the children, whose parents cannot out of empathy and compassion. However, they do not recognize some of the basic necessities and special needs that are necessary to care for the children now living with them.

In many cases they have no formal custody agreement that would identify them as kinship caregivers. It never crosses their mind that they need to know the children's social security numbers, have the shot records and medical cards. A combination of these and other things are needed to enroll the children in school, day care, camp, or see a doctor, just to name a few. Often birth certificates are required and they do not know how to go about acquiring them and cannot afford the cost. Kinship care parents come to me desperate because they do not know where to begin.

So often the kinship care providers have no idea that throughout Ohio that there is a support system available to them that can help them work through the complexities and some of the financial needs that they are facing. Furthermore, non-profit agencies and even county human service workers have a basic lack of and knowledge understanding of kinship care. Therefore, they will be given no information or the wrong information when they seek out help from these agencies. That is why the Navigator Program as would be established through HB 126 needs to be passed. It would provide the assistance to connect kinship providers to the services that exist with which they so many are unaware.

The passage of this legislation is very important for the parents of kinship care children. It is even more important that it be passed for the children of kinship care parents.