

Proponent Testimony before the Ohio House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee  
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House Bill 304

Greetings Chairman Schaffer, Vice Chair Scherer, Ranking Member Rogers and members of the House Ways and Means Committee. I'm Michele Blackford and I would like to speak to the impact Ohio adoption tax credits have on my family and my profession. I work as a clinical therapist for foster youth and as a foster care licensing specialist, recruiting and assessing prospective homes. On a personal note, I am a mother to three children with special needs. Jason was born with autism and is now twelve years-old. I adopted my twin sons Angel and Hristo five years ago. They are now ten, both diagnosed with autism. Angel also has Cerebral Palsy, and Hristo has significant cognitive delays beyond his autism diagnosis.

This goes without saying, but in my profession I have learned that a positive family environment is the foundation that either helps or hinders a child's ability to succeed in today's society. In my home, I have learned that creating this positive family environment is no easy task. While the rewards of motherhood certainly outweigh its challenges, the challenges I face as a mother of children with disabilities can be overwhelming. Raising them requires huge commitments to enhanced care at home, school, and in the community, and even this extra level of care does not bring their quality of life up to the standards of a typical child's. Because of the burden this can place on families, couples with special needs children are significantly more likely to get divorced than the national average. Many single parents even find themselves exhausted to the point of counting down the days until their children turn eighteen and can go to live in a state-run group home.

I know what it is like to be an unmarried parent, fearing that no other person will be willing to take on the financial, emotional and time commitments of another person's child with disabilities. I often worry about who would be responsible for them if something were to happen to me. I have been in a serious relationship with my significant other for four years. He is a positive male role model for my boys, but he didn't adopt them, I did. Angel and Hristo do not have a father listed on their birth certificate. My significant other is willing to act as a father for my kids, but in many ways it feels as if we're being discriminated against compared to more traditional families. A big factor as to why we have not gotten married is the lack of support for stepparent adoptions as the law currently stands. House Bill 304 would be a positive step forward for families like mine, those who have to pause forward movement in one area of their lives in order to simply maintain another area. As is, I cannot afford to get married and lose the financial support I rely on to provide my children the care they need – even as I work a full- and part-time job.

I will need to rely on this support even further in the future as my children grow into adults. Unlike with typical children, I cannot expect to send them off into the world to care for themselves, relying only partially on their parents to navigate adulthood. I do not want to have to place them into a group home, either. Caring for children with disabilities is a lifelong commitment. In order to build stable Ohio families, it takes a combination of immeasurable love and tangible resources. The love I have for my children will never run out, but unfortunately my resources might. Allowing greater support and investment upfront for parents of adult children with disabilities would ease some of the heaviest burdens, and open doors for more permanent and stable home lives for some of the most vulnerable in our society. Thank you for your time and attention today and please vote in support of House Bill 304.