



House Health Committee
Proponent Testimony HB14
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Chair Merrin, Vice-Chair Manning, 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 (PCSAs) 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 14. We applaud Representatives Boyd and Baldrige 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.

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

maintain 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.

Most children living in kinship families have no children services involvement. Census data show that nearly 100,000 Ohio grandparents are raising grandchildren in our state (2016); 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-six percent (over 4100) of the nearly 16,000 children in custody statewide on July 1, 2018 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. As I mentioned earlier, the largest number of children living with kinship caregivers are not involved with the children services system.

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. HB14 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.

Several recent developments make this the right time to move this bill:

- Ohio has received a federal Kinship Navigator Grant to help develop its program to meet the criteria as defined by the federal Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 (FFPSA). With this grant, Ohio is embarking on a robust planning process that includes a wide range of stakeholders such as kin caregivers, youth raised by kin, current navigators, and PCSAs.
- Through FFPSA, federal reimbursement at a 50:50 match is now available for state kinship navigator programs that meet criteria. That means the \$5M GRF appropriation in this bill will draw down another \$5M.
- The number of children placed with relatives by public children services agencies continues to grow.

¹ Population Reference Bureau's analysis of the 2009, 2010, and 2011 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Surveys.

The planning process and new funding outlined above provide a unique opportunity to get the kinship navigator program right and have resources to help sustain it. HB14 provides the vehicle for moving forward and the appropriate flexibility to ensure Ohio's design meets the criteria to qualify for federal match funding.

We thank Rep.'s Boyd and Baldrige for bringing HB14 forward and ask that this Committee and the General Assembly support the bill. Thank you and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.