



**Representative West
Sponsor Testimony House Bill 12
House Health Committee**

Chairman Merrin, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Boyd, and members of the House Health Committee - thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 12. This bill seeks to take the first step in making Ohio a world leader in ensuring every child has the support they need to be emotionally, socially, and behaviorally healthy by creating the Ohio Children's Behavioral Health Prevention Network Stakeholder Group.

The Director of Children's Initiatives, one of the members of the stakeholder group, will determine the scope of the inquiry and work with the group to develop goals, prototypes, outcomes and collect evidence based data. The group shall then furnish a report within 18 months to the Governor and General Assembly with recommendations. It is our hope that with this report, we can focus on preventing and managing children's behavioral health issues before they interfere with healthy development.

Having worked in the mental health field for over 25 years and with youth specifically for almost half of my career, I have seen firsthand how children's mental health has not received the resources required to prevent the youth mental health and suicide crisis that we see in our state today.

Between August 2017 and March 2018, a staggering 12 students in my district died by suicide. According to state data on the deaths of Ohioans, at least 872 Ohioans younger than 20 have been lost to suicide over the past decade. It's time to end this crisis. We know that half of all lifetime mental illnesses begin by age 14, and we

must do something to catch the signs and focus on preventing more serious issues down the line.

I've heard from so many concerned parents, teachers, and youth about the need for a special focus on children mental health services and resources. Parents and caregivers want to help their children when behavioral issues come up, but do not necessarily have the tools in their toolbox to do so. Simultaneously, our school districts - who already have limited resources - are having to figure out how to address their students' serious mental health issues – many times without a mental health professional within the halls of some of their schools.

There is so much incredible work already being done at the local and state-level to combat this crisis. What we need now is to bring everyone together to build an integrated and coordinated network of agencies and partners who can sustain strong and supportive social networks of parents and caregivers in communities to ensure that all children are healthy and successful.

While we recognize that this is only the first step in giving our children and families the resources and support they deserve and need to thrive, it is the right thing to do. We need to renew the Ohio Promise to strengthen our families and children by giving our children a chance to thrive, not just survive. Thank you again for allowing me to testify on this bill. I look forward to answering any questions the committee may have.