

House Bill 408

Health Committee

Chairmen Lipps

Vice Chair Manning

Ranking Member Boyd

Members

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Health Committee in support of House Bill 408.

To date 1,517 children have found safety and security at Blessing House since we opened our doors in 2005. We serve children from birth to age twelve primarily from Lorain County but have also served children from six other Northeast Ohio counties. Currently we are licensed by ODJFS for 10 children but are in the process of expanding to a capacity of 28 children.

Our mission has always been about providing for the safe care of our children. Blessing House began as an outgrowth of our experience volunteering with the CASA program in Lorain County. Our hope was to allow parents an opportunity to address the needs of the family while we assumed the care for their children thus leading to keeping the family together when appropriate.

Over time we have expanded our programming to meet the increasing and complex needs of families. No longer do we see families who come with a single concern but rather our discussions uncover family history and parent trauma that places the children at risk. Our Child Advocate attends to the trauma needs of our children and enables them to put words to experience and encourages them to speak their own story of healing. Our Family advocate engages parents in identifying in their own history, those events and people that have shaped their current reality.

As a staff, we meet daily to review the needs of the family, to track efforts to address potential risks and to assess gaps in services for parents and children. We provide parent education, case management and advocacy on their behalf. We are committed to companionship of our families so that stabilization can occur.

A crisis care facility can play an important role in the work of the local child protection agency. In 2019, there were 1880 calls screened in for a response by Lorain County Children Services. Over 75% of those calls were categorized as alternative response situations. Blessing House works cooperatively with the staff of Lorain County Children Services as they determine the risk factors for child safety. We provide an alternative placement for children that does not impinge on the custody held by parents and promotes healthy parent child interaction through supervised and directed visits. Caseworkers are invited to take part in the development of our engagement plan that delineates the areas of concern that the parent must address.

The services provided by Children's Crisis Care Facilities align with the goals of the Family First Prevention Services Act enacted in February, 2018. This bill aims to prevent children from entering into foster care by providing preventive services to families at risk of entering the child

welfare system. This bill recognizes the need to keep children safely with their families and avoid the traumatic experience of foster care placement.

61% of our families have indicated they would have needed to leave their children in a dangerous or inappropriate situation if Blessing House had not been available to them. 22% admitted they had no other options available to them and would have either requested out of home placement or would have needed to rely on the legal system to intervene. Blessing House provided a safe alternative for all of these families.

House Bill 408 provides the necessary flexibility for a crisis care facility to develop according to the needs of the community it serves. Each county in Ohio faces many similar issues but to different degrees of impact. A new facility can begin with providing the direct care to children as established by the crisis care facility licensing. As they become more aware of the use of their services, they can choose to pursue certification.

Blessing House most closely aligns with the Family Preservation Center model as a means to better serve our area. Our current programming falls in line with the requirements and our new building incorporates physical space and items that currently do not fit within our house. We have begun the conversation regarding accreditation and are gathering local professionals to support our efforts in pursuing accreditation. Our effort to keep improving our care for children and families will find a natural conclusion in seeking to be certified as a Family Preservation Center.

We appreciate the efforts of Representative Gayle Manning and Representative Patton to sponsor this bill, We ask your support to keep all of Ohio moving ahead as we seek to care for the most vulnerable among us. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Sister Mary Berigan SND
Executive Director
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