



**Proponent Testimony on H.B. 408
House Health Committee
Natalie A. Leek-Nelson, President and CEO**

February 13, 2020

Chairman Lipps, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Boyd and members of the Committee, my name is Natalie Leek-Nelson, President and CEO of Providence House, the state's first licensed children's crisis nursery located in Cleveland. Thank you for the opportunity to offer proponent testimony on House Bill 408.

For nearly 40 years, Providence House has worked to keep kids safe and families together. We are licensed as a children's crisis care facility by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and are a trusted community resource that has cared for and reunited over 8,000 children and families.

We work with parents who are struggling to meet their children's basic needs, require medical, mental health, or substance abuse treatment, are homeless, or fleeing domestic violence. 75% of the families we serve have history with child protective services and fear that will lose custody of their children if they seek help. So, they come to us so that we can keep their children safe, resolve their crises, and keep their family together.

We provide free, noncustodial shelter to children newborn to 12 years old. We partner with parents to address family crises, strengthen parenting skills, and wrap and connect resources and services around each family to ensure positive, permanent change for the whole family. If the bill passes, we will apply for the new Family Preservation Center sub licensure defined in House Bill 408 as a certified children's crisis care facility that has as its primary purpose the preservation of families through preteen foster care diversion practices and programs.

Our multi-generational approach focused on both the child and caregiver works. Last year 98% of the children who stayed with us were reunited with their parent after an average stay of 24 days – this is an 89% higher rate of reunification than foster care in 95% less time than traditional foster care. If a parent is unable to resume care of their child Providence House works to identify a safe family member to become the child's guardian. If there is no safe family identified, we will engage JFS for a foster care placement.

And our families stay together - an external evaluation of our families conducted by Case Western Reserve University found that 82% of the children we serve were not placed in foster care – even 3-5 years after our services. We are receiving national recognition for our success. Last year, Providence House was recognized by the U.S. Children’s Bureau as a Children’s Champion for Preventing Child Maltreatment.

Knowing the average cost annually for each child in foster care is \$25,782, our services saved nearly \$9 million in foster care costs in Cuyahoga County last year alone. Factor in additional costs for higher need children and this figure quadruples to nearly \$30 million.

Demand for our services continues to grow. In the past five years, the number of unserved children has quadrupled with 458 children waitlisted last year due to limited capacity and staffing ratio challenges. To address this need, Providence House is undertaking construction of a new 20- bed Crisis Nursery and Family Resiliency Center in the Buckeye-Shaker Neighborhood of Cleveland. This expansion will allow us to serve an additional 325 children each year.

Our results have created interest in other Ohio communities seeking a solution to the foster care crisis. Providence House is currently supporting champions in Toledo, Akron and Columbus who hope to replicate our model and keep hundreds more children safe and families together.

House Bill 408 will provide necessary updates to regulations for Ohio’s three existing crisis nurseries that will also benefit any additional nurseries that look to open in the state. The bill recognizes that Ohio now has two distinct crisis nursery models. By further defining the types of crisis nurseries that now exist under the Family Preservation Center and Residential Infant Care Center sub licensures we can better support inquiries for new nurseries and align them to the types of licensing models they should operate within.

Importantly, the bill will also allow for volunteers and interns that have passed background checks and received the same training as childcare staff to count toward staff ratios for up to three hours in the case of an emergency. There have been times when staff have gotten ill while working at the nursery, but they could not leave until another employee arrived because it would throw off our staff ratios. Similarly, the bill would allow volunteers and interns to count towards the ratios while providing transportation to the children. This provision will allow us to serve more children each year, as Providence House serves families in 31 zip codes in Northeast Ohio. Last year we had to waitlist 69 children because of transportation limitations due to staff ratios.

The Revised Code currently allows children to stay at Providence House up to 60 days, or 90 if their parent is in-patient or incarcerated. House Bill 408 extends the length of stay for all children up to 90 days. We do not anticipate our average length of stay extending substantially with this change, but there are times when a parent may need a few more days or weeks to get back on their feet or secure safe housing prior to

reuniting with their child and this provision will give them the flexibility needed. Parents visit with their children often throughout the week when they are in our care, and we have social workers on staff that are checking in with mom and dad to make sure they are connecting with community resources that are needed.

I ask for your support of House Bill 408. This bill will support the important work provided by Ohio's crisis nurseries and provide greater ease of entry for new nurseries that open in our state to keep kids safe and families together. Thank you for your consideration of this important legislation, I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.