

My name is Sally Dyer and I am from Dayton. I'd like to begin by thanking Chairman Jones, Vice-Chair Manchester and Ranking Member Robinson, and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to submit my testimony in writing. I would have preferred to have given my testimony in person, as I've done twice before, in 2017 and 2019, on the legislation known as Erin's Law / HB321 before you today. However, due to being immuno-compromised, I did not feel safe coming to the State House to testify in the midst of a pandemic. I hope you take a few minutes to read and consider this written testimony.

I have devoted most of my adult life to advocating for and acting on issues impacting the health and safety of children. I was the Team Coordinator for the CARE team - a multidisciplinary child abuse team at Children's Medical Center in Dayton for 3 years; I served as a volunteer CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate / Guardian Ad Litem) and represented more than 30 abused, neglected and dependent children in Montgomery County over the course of 18 years; and facilitated the development and management of multiple mentoring programs in both public and charter schools in Dayton over the past 2 decades.

I'm confident many of you have already heard some of these statistics, so I will summarize only a few. A 2005 Center for Disease Control (CDC) report estimated that *1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of eighteen*. In the same report, *approximately 1 in 5 female high school students reported being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner*. Furthermore, "disclosure of sexual abuse is often delayed; children often avoid telling because they are either afraid of a negative reaction from their parents or of being harmed by the abuser. As such, they often delay disclosure until adulthood."¹ Children are often warned against or threatened about exposing the secret. So, sadly, the reported statistics in this area are widely acknowledged as underreported.²

The Rape, Assault and Incest National Network (RAINN), reports that "every 73 seconds an American is sexually assaulted. And every 9 minutes, that victim is a child." Those are alarming statistics in and of themselves, but even more so, that "*as many as 93 percent of victims under the age of 18 know the abuser*."³ Childhood sexual abuse and assault happens in families, in schools, in neighborhoods, and much more frequently than any of us realize because the victim is often too scared or ashamed to tell a trusted adult.

All of the above statistics can and should be magnified in light of the "new normal" our children have been thrust into this spring due to COVID-19. Attending school, offered so many at-risk children, a place of safety, normalcy and caring teachers and other school staff persons. One can only imagine how many of Ohio's children have experienced trauma - physical, emotional or

¹Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Data and Statistics*. Atlanta, GA: Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

²The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Child Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet, April 2009

³<https://www.rainn.org/about-sexual-assault>, The Rape, Assault and Incest National Network

sexual, since the Stay-at-Home order began. Both Governor DeWine and Dr. Amy Acton, have expressed concern about the safety of the multitude of children who have found themselves isolated since March, in unsafe home environments. The CDC reports that when children do disclose abuse, *teachers are the most likely professional to be told.*⁴ The schools need to be prepared for these children when they finally do return to school and Erin's Law would help immensely in that regard.

Gov. DeWine is focused on improving pediatric mental health for Ohio's children. The Governor has stated, "we know what impact that trauma has on children, we have to do something about it."⁵ I'm confident that the amount of trauma being experienced by our children during the pandemic will be impacting them and our mental health system for years to come. On March 1, Governor DeWine said, "As a state, we must do better for at-risk children. We have to be constantly vigilant to ensure that we are driving policy that ensures that best practices are in place to keep children safe." I believe that HB 321 would support the Governor's goal to better serve our at-risk children.

It is my hope that you read and consider the very relevant and important testimony of Ms. Lia Williams. She works for the Ohio Crime Victim Justice Center as an advocate for victims of crime. She and I share the same history of being sexually abused by family members, prompting both of us to continue to advocate for the passage of Erin's Law in Ohio. Prior to her move to Ohio, she advocated for, implemented and taught an Erin's Law-type program in Missouri elementary schools. Her first hand knowledge and experience should be helpful to the Committee as you consider this bill. HB 321 would allow for our children to learn, age-appropriately, not only about "safe" touches, but also encourage children that it is OK to share with their teacher or other trusted adult, if they feel uncomfortable about a situation happening to them. There are many, free-resources that schools can select from to bring this 1 hour/year, important message to their students.

HB 321 is certainly *not* a partisan issue. I cannot imagine any priority higher than protecting our children. In the years since 2016 when HB 85 died in the Senate Education committee, and HB 377 died in this committee last term, shocking events around the sexual abuse of our children continue to make headlines regularly. In addition to the Springboro elementary school case involving more than 80 first grade girls, other headlines from just my Dayton-area community have included multiple cases involving child pornography by trusted community leaders, including a school's DARE officer, a former suburban police chief and an influential child psychologist...with whom I worked closely when I was the CARE Team coordinator. These situations all highlight the need to give "tools" to our children and empower them to stay safe and/or seek safety from harm...which can come from people you'd least expect or suspect.

⁴ Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Data and Statistics*. Atlanta, GA: Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

⁵ <https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/local/dewine-visits-dayton-children-announce-mental-health-summit/2l6BpWKfmDpIDGKR4aQEbK/>

It is my sincere hope that this is the final time this legislation needs to be introduced in the General Assembly of Ohio and that this committee will support and make it a priority. I urge this committee will take a vote *today* in support of HB 321 so that it can move forward in the legislation process. Ohio's children are depending on you to make this a priority.

I leave you with this quote from Dr. Bruce Perry, author of the book The Boy Who Was Raised As A Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook / What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love and Healing,

“Ultimately what determines how children survive trauma, physically, emotionally or psychologically, is whether the people around them - particularly the adults they should be able to trust and rely on - stand by them with love, support and encouragement.”⁶

Will you be one of them? I certainly hope so.

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⁶ Perry MD PhD., Bruce D. And Szalavitz, Maia; The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog and Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook, What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love and Healing. Pg xxviii