



**Proponent testimony submitted to the
Ohio House Primary and Secondary Education Committee
House Bill 321
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Ohio Network of Children's Advocacy Centers
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Chair Jones, Vice Chair Manchester, Ranking Member Robinson and House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, I truly appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the Ohio Network of Children's Advocacy Centers, or ONCAC, and present to you our support of House Bill 321. Our membership consists of 37 accredited and developing child advocacy centers, which provide a variety of services to abused children throughout the state of Ohio. These services include a combination of first response intervention (such as providing pediatric forensic examinations and medical support of child survivors of abuse), ongoing support and assistance (such as family advocacy, assistance and systems navigation), age appropriate therapeutic services, and participation in investigative efforts alongside our law enforcement partners. While we are proud to have served over 9,000 Ohio children last year at our centers, we know that statistically there are many more victims.

Child physical and sexual abuse is a difficult and uncomfortable topic, and as our colleagues at the Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence and elsewhere can also attest, abuse as a child can have far reaching impacts into adulthood. Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, can compound and build into one another over time and result in a multitude of maladaptive and destructive behavior in adolescence and adulthood, including complex mental health issues and substance dependence. Considering our ongoing crisis of both opioid addiction and mental health, we must ask ourselves: How many invisible victims are out there?



We have broad statistics that many of you might be familiar with, and which have been cited in our colleague's testimony: 1 in 4 female children and 1 in 6 male children will experience sexual abuse before they reach the age of 18. Consider the current population of Ohio children under the age of 18 stands at 2, 670, 658. Now consider our previous question: How many invisible victims are out there?

Today you have heard personal stories from brave survivors, and you have heard stories from those who have been in the field as educators and as advocates. Advocates at rape crisis programs and child advocacy centers across the state have been collaborating in many of our communities and providing outreach and education to keep children and families safe. The burden of abuse should not sit on the shoulders of an innocent child. The burden of action should not sit on the shoulders of a single educator, or a single legislator, or a single advocate, or a single officer of the law. HB 321 gives us the opportunity to coordinate these local efforts statewide and utilize this collective effort to protect Ohio citizens from harm.

HB 321, or Erin's Law, would help us open the doors of collaboration with our educators and administrators. Erin's Law would help us to rebuild a sense of trust in the aftermath of fear and violence by giving trusted adults the resources and special knowledge necessary to help children who are in a scary situation. Erin's Law would help us to prevent harm by responsibly empowering children with an ability to set boundaries with their own bodies, and an awareness of where to go and what to do if something bad or scary ever happens to them or to a friend.

Erin's Law is intended to help preserve the innocence of childhood. It is our burden, and our responsibility, as adults to respond and intervene in cases of abuse. It is our burden, and our responsibility, as adults to work together and stop it from happening in the first place. We can take this burden on together.