

Chairman Romanchuk, Ranking Member West, and Members of the Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services:

Forcing parents of children with disabilities and mental illnesses to relinquish custody of their children to get help is wrong. This should not need to be said, but I have found myself having to say it for the past 5-years. Again and again. Here we are in the year 2019 and it still needs to be said. I do not think that anyone disagrees with me. What has been missing has been the willpower to end the evil of custody relinquishment in Ohio.

My wife and I were forced to surrender custody of our 16-year-old son Andrew when his violent outburst and behavioral issues became too extreme to address in our family setting. Andrew has autism, a severe intellectual disability, and mental illness. He was diagnosed prior to his second birthday and over the course of the next 14 years, we worked hard to meet his needs. We constantly searched for and collaborated with every agency and organization that could help us.

Eventually Andrew's behavior reached the point where our family's safety was at risk. We were told that he needed out-of-home residential treatment. Andrew's Medicaid Waiver would not assist with this and neither would our family's private insurance. We were told our only option was to surrender custody to our county children's services agency.

Making that call to children's services was the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life. I promised would do anything I could to prevent this from happening to anyone else.

My family struggled for so long in silence, afraid of what would happen if we ever went down that "rabbit hole". That fear turned to humiliation, as we had to navigate through the system and have a guardian appointed; a stranger who could allegedly understand the needs of my non-verbal son better than me. That fear turned to sorrow as my wife and I sat in the parking lot of the institution, two-and-a-half hours away where my son was sent, after we were told we were not allowed seeing him that first weekend. That fear turned to anger when I sat in my son's OEDI (Ohio Eligibility Determination Instrument) meeting, a meeting to determine his eligibility for adult services, and was told I was not allowed to answer any of the questions on the assessment.

That is just what happened to one family in one county. I have heard from parents who have been threatened with charges of child abandonment or threatened that their child could be adopted away from them. I still feel lucky that my son was not sent out of state like other children are. I am still frustrated that no one can look me in the eye and give me a straight answer when I ask "why?" How is this acceptable?

I was happy when I heard Governor DeWine's office announce \$25 million in each fiscal year to coordinate care for multi-system youth. It honestly felt like as a state, we finally found the will to do something about custody relinquishment. I am here to ask that you support that endeavor. Children like my Andrew, those still at home and in the system, need your support.

I also ask you as a father who was forced to surrender custody of his son; please work to end custody relinquishment in Ohio. Beyond your work in the budget. Help figure out why this is

still happening and fight for us wherever you can. Do not let another family, another family already struggling; suffer the way my family did.

Thank you.

Mark Butler