

Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Health and Human Services Subcommittee

April 9, 2019

Testimony on HB 166

Witness: Bryan Forney, LISW-S

CEO

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Chairman Romanchuk, Ranking Member West and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on HB 166.

My name is Bryan Forney; I am the CEO of Focus on Youth, Inc., a non-profit community agency headquartered in the Cincinnati suburb of West Chester, Ohio. My organization was founded in 1992 to help the most vulnerable among us— children who have suffered abuse and neglect, experienced trauma, or struggle with behavior issues. We are a faith-based, non-profit agency committed to transforming children’s lives and equipping all parents with the knowledge and skills necessary to care for vulnerable children.

During 2018, my organization provided safe homes and supportive services to almost 200 Ohio foster children. We are a contracted provider of several county children services agencies, including Adams, Butler, Clermont, Clinton, Hamilton, Highland, and Warren counties, who utilize our network of foster caregivers and trained staff to provide temporary homes for children in their custody, and assist in safely reunifying children, finding adoptive homes for them, or achieve other forms of permanency. In fact, last fiscal year alone, we facilitated adoptions of 28 foster children in our network’s homes.

My organization, which is nationally accredited and certified by ODJFS and OhioMHAS, is able to provide foster care and support services to kids in child welfare custody because our county agency partners have funding to contract with us to provide those services. However, largely due to the opioid crisis, our counties have experienced a significant spike in the amount of children in their custody who require out of home placement. State funding to the county agencies

has not kept pace with this trend, nor has local funding through county government.

Our agency – and many others – have been overwhelmed with referrals. We simply do not have enough trained foster homes available to provide the type of care for all of the babies, toddlers, adolescents, and teenagers that enter children services custody. Counties are also faced with funding shortfalls which hampers their ability to find suitable placements for these children. Sometimes they resort to placing children in foster homes several counties – and several hours – away, due to the lack of suitable homes nearby. Further, we learned from the testimony of ODJFS Director Hall last week that a record-high amount of Ohio foster children – 473 – are placed out-of-state.

Clearly, Ohio's child welfare system is in crisis. The proposed \$74 million annual funding increase in HB 166 for child welfare is essential and I applaud the Governor and Legislature for proposing such an investment. Those dollars would be provided to county children services to support vulnerable foster, kinship, and primary families, and to support their rising costs for out-of-home placements. I encourage the Legislature to maintain this proposed funding.

HB 166 also incorporates important legislation that nearly passed the House last year that would empower ODJFS to revise foster parent training requirements. I strongly support this language as it will enable our state to revise, streamline, and improve how we onboard and retain foster parents.

Finally, I want to call attention to the need for investment in marketing of foster parenting. HB 166 does not provide funding for local foster parent recruitment, despite the major need. There is \$5 million in the ODJFS budget that has been communicated as "supporting foster and kinship family recruitment and support", however it is my understanding that those funds would actually assist county children services with their personnel costs associated with supporting foster and kinship families. Maintaining that funding is also important, but clearly does not meet the need for funding foster parent recruitment in communities.

In the Children's Alliance budget proposal, we call new funding to ODJFS to establish competitive grants for community agencies to catalyze local foster home recruitment marketing campaigns. Research shows that marketing for foster parents is most effective at the community-level, yet our communities don't have access to any state funding to engage in these important efforts. We encourage the Legislature to consider this added investment at such a critical time.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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