



**Testimony on H.B. 166: Main Operating Budget for FY 2020-2021
House Finance: Health and Human Services Subcommittee
Natalie A. Leek-Nelson, President and CEO**

Wednesday, April 10, 2019

Chairman Romanchuk, Ranking Member West and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Natalie Leek-Nelson, President and CEO of Providence House, the state's first children's crisis nursery located in Cleveland. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on House Bill 166.

Across Ohio, there is broad recognition that we are facing a foster care crisis. Last year, more than 26,700 children were placed out of home, over 3,000 more than in 2016. Our communities are struggling to find foster families for children entering care. Public children service agencies are sometimes forced to look beyond their county and even state borders to find available homes. Many of the children are young: 65% are under the age of 12, over 25% are 3 years old and younger. Beyond the trauma for a child who is removed from their biological parent, mothers whose children are taken into foster care experience significantly higher rates of mental illness and many lose all hope. The rate of death by suicide is 4 times higher for mothers whose children are not in their custody.

The foster care crisis is also expensive. The annual cost of placing children in foster care has risen 40% over the past five years. These costs will continue to grow if we do not shift our focus to prevention of parents relinquishing custody of their children.

At Providence House, our vision is that children everywhere are raised in safe, loving families free from abuse and neglect. Over the past nearly 40 years, we have built a unique crisis nursery program that keeps children safe and families together. Often these are parents in crisis who are struggling to find the resources to meet their family's basic needs, require medical, mental health, or substance abuse treatment, or are fleeing domestic violence and do not have alternatives for childcare. 75% of the families we serve have some history with child protective services. Parents fear that custody of their children may be taken from them if they ask for help or seek the services that will help them to address family safety and instability.

Fortunately for families in the Greater Cleveland area, Providence House has become a trusted community resource. Licensed as a children's crisis care facility by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, we have thousands of stories to share about the 8,000 children and families who have received individual nurturing and support in our home-like environment.

At the same time, our Licensed Social Workers partner with parents and caregivers to address family crises, strengthen parenting skills, and wrap resources and services around each family to ensure positive, permanent change for the whole family. We provide support for families for up to a year after they are reunited through our Aftercare program. Social workers continue to provide wraparound services and parents have the opportunity to participate in group parent education where they are building social supports with other parents and learning new parenting strategies using a trauma-informed curriculum.

We know that it is through this multi-generational approach focused on both the child and caregiver, that we can truly have an enduring impact on the safety and stability of families. Last year 99% of the children who stayed with us were reunited with their parent or guardian after an average length of stay of 24 days. And 90% of families were fully engaged in Providence House services, spending several hours each week visiting their children and participating in individual counseling, wraparound case management, parent education, and trauma services.

Our crisis nursery program is a proven prevention and early intervention service to strengthen and preserve families, support healthy child development, and reduce foster care placements. An external analysis of our client data found that caregivers who engage in our services see increases in their children's educational enrollment, employment, income, and safe housing. For families that participate in our Aftercare program, the mean monthly income increased from \$684 when they first reached out to Providence House to \$1,028 in Aftercare, an improvement of over 50%

While nearly all children served by Providence House are reunited with their parent or guardian, a university-led external evaluation found that 82% of the children we serve were not placed in foster care up to 3-5 years after our services. And we are receiving national recognition for our success. This year, Providence House is being 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 \$25,782ⁱ, our services saved nearly \$9 Million in foster care costs for the 323 children we served just last year alone. Factor in additional costs for higher need childrenⁱⁱ and related medical and legal costs for foster care placements and this figure quadruples to nearly \$30 Million annually.

Over the last three budget cycles, crisis nurseries have received state support. During most of this time, this dedicated amount has been shared by two crisis nurseries, Providence House in Cuyahoga County and Blessing House in Lorain County. However, in the last budget, funding for crisis nurseries was cut in half to just \$150,000 annually. In the same period, two additional crisis nurseries emerged: Brigid's Path in Kettering to support infants and families impacted by the opioid crisis and St. Joseph's Orphanage licensed to provide emergency placements in Hamilton and surrounding counties struggling to accommodate the increasing number of children entering foster care. This cut in state support forced our growing Ohio crisis nursery community to do more with fewer resources.

Meanwhile, interest is rising in other Ohio communities for a solution to the foster care crisis. There is growing recognition that interventions can be provided before children are taken away from their parent. Crisis nurseries can be there at the critical moment that parents reach out for support. We can provide the wraparound services needed to stabilize and preserve families. Providence House is currently supporting champions in Toledo and Columbus, who hope to replicate our model and keep hundreds of more children safe and families together in Ohio.

As is often the case, funding is the main barrier to new crisis nurseries opening. We are grateful to have received state support in previous budget cycles; however, the vast majority of our funding, nearly 85%, comes through philanthropic contributions. House Bill 166 currently includes \$150,000 each fiscal year to be shared by Ohio's crisis care facilities. I ask that you consider increasing this line item to \$1.5 million each fiscal year to support crisis nurseries. These funds will allow Providence House, Blessing House, and Brigid's Path to increase their capacity to serve as many children as possible. It will also provide a stream of state support for the likely two more crisis nurseries in Columbus and Toledo that will begin operations this biennium.

While we must make sure that our communities have the resources to help children in foster care, Ohio will only reverse the trend of a growing foster care population by investing in preventing families from relinquishing custody. Your investment in crisis nurseries will demonstrate your commitment to supporting at-risk families and will generate substantial savings for the community.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you about House Bill 166 and our request for support of the vital work done by crisis nurseries to keep hundreds of children safe and their families together while bringing significant cost savings to the state. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

ⁱ The average annual cost for a child in foster care is \$25,782. (2011 White paper):
https://www.adoptioncouncil.org/images/stories/NCFA_ADOPTION_ADVOCATE_NO35.pdf

ⁱⁱ \$91,250 per child in foster care with physical/mental/behavioral health problems and related costs
(<http://cuyahogacounty.us/en-US/Triage-Team-Foster-Care.aspx>)