



**Testimony on Sub H.B. 166: Main Operating Budget for FY 2020-2021
Senate Finance Committee
Natalie A. Leek-Nelson, President and CEO**

Tuesday, May 28, 2019

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Burke, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the Committee, my name is Natalie Leek-Nelson, President and CEO of Providence House, the state's first licensed children's crisis nursery located in Cleveland. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on Substitute House Bill 166.

Ohio is facing a foster care crisis. Last year, nearly 27,000 children were placed out of home - over 3,000 more than in 2016. We are struggling to find foster families and public children's services agencies are often forced to look beyond their county and even state borders to find foster homes. Beyond the trauma for a child removed from their parent, mothers who lose custody have higher rates of mental illness, substance abuse, and their death by suicide is 4 times higher.

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 on programs that prevent child maltreatment and help parents retain custody of their children.

My goal today is to raise your awareness and support for crisis nurseries as proven early intervention services that strengthen and preserve families, support healthy child development, and reduce foster care placements - which can save tens of millions of dollars in foster care costs across our state.

For nearly 40 years, Providence House has worked to keep kids safe and families together. We are licensed as a children's crisis care facility by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and are a trusted community resource that has reunited over 8,000 children and families.

We work with parents who are struggling to meet their children's basic needs, require medical, mental health, or substance abuse treatment, are homeless, or fleeing domestic violence. 75% of the families we serve have history with child protective services and fear that will lose custody of their children if they seek help. So, they come to us.

We provide free, noncustodial shelter to children newborn to 12 years old and partner with parents to address family crises, strengthen parenting skills, and wrap and connect resources and services around each family to ensure positive, permanent change for the whole family.

Our multi-generational approach focused on both the child and caregiver works. Last year 99% of the children who stayed with us were reunited with their parent after an average stay of 24 days – this is an 89% higher rate of reunification than foster care in 95% less time.

And families stay together - a university evaluation of our families found that 82% of the children we serve were not placed in foster care – even 3-5 years after our services. We are receiving national recognition for our success. This year, Providence House was recognized by the U.S. Children's Bureau as a Children's Champion for Preventing Child Maltreatment.

Our services saved nearly \$9 million in foster care costs in Cuyahoga County last year alone. Factor in additional costs for higher need children and this quadruples to nearly \$30 million. Imagine the impact and savings if more Ohio counties had a crisis nursery to help prevent parents from needing to relinquish custody to foster care.

Our results have created interest in other Ohio communities seeking a solution to the foster care crisis. Providence House is currently supporting champions in Toledo and Columbus who hope to replicate our model in this biennium and keep hundreds of more children safe and families together in Ohio.

In the last budget, funding for crisis nurseries was cut in half to \$150,000 annually while in the same period two new crisis nurseries opened: Brigid's Path in Kettering and St. Joseph's Orphanage in Hamilton. This reduction in state support forced our Ohio crisis nursery community to reduce our capacity, limiting our ability to serve growing numbers of children in crisis.

For Ohio's existing and future crisis nurseries, the main barrier to opening and serving the optimal number of families is funding. **Sub House Bill 166 currently includes only \$150,000 each fiscal year to be shared by Ohio's crisis care facilities. I ask that you consider increasing this line item to \$750,000 each fiscal year to support all of Ohio's crisis nurseries.**

While much attention has been given to recruiting kin and foster families in Ohio, I ask that you give that same attention to programs that keep kids out of foster care and with their parents – programs like crisis nurseries that are already helping Ohio's families stay safely together. Your support will not only demonstrate your commitment to preserving families – it will align Ohio with the Family First Prevention Services Act passed by Congress in 2018 - and generate millions in savings for child welfare and foster care costs in Ohio.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you about Sub 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.