



Representative Boyd & Representative Rezabek Sponsor Testimony House Bill 126

Thank you Chairman Ginter and Members of the House Committee on Community and Family Advancement for hearing sponsor testimony for House Bill 126. I also want to thank my Joint Sponsor, Representative Rezabek, his patience, guidance, and his experience with those whom we aim to assist through this bill have been invaluable.

House Bill 126 is the product of meetings with proponents and interested parties from across the state. Although this legislation has gone through a few changes since last General Assembly, the context and the goals remain the same. We need to assist those who have answered the call to care for our most vulnerable citizens. We need to assist our Kinship caregivers, as they intervene in situations of crisis.

The original bill had two main components, it created an alternative pathway to home foster care licensure and required a system of statewide kinship navigators. The substitute bill before you removed the alternative licensure language and further defines the navigator program. The licensure language will either be addressed in a separate bill, or as I understand it, some of those conversations are occurring in this budget process.

First, I think it is necessary to define a few basic terms. Kinship caregiver is defined (ORC 5101.85) by, and unchanged by this legislation as any of the following adults caring for a child in place of the parents: grandparents (up to "great-great-great"), siblings, aunts, uncles, nephews, and nieces (up to "great-grand"), first cousins and first cousins once removed, stepparents and stepsiblings, spouses and former spouses of the above individuals, a legal guardian of the child, or a legal custodian of the child. More often than not, the parents of these children are facing incarceration, addiction and substance abuse, and even death.

Second, kinship navigators are defined by Ohio Revised Code 5101.851 as a statewide program of kinship care navigators to assist kinship caregivers who are seeking information regarding, or assistance obtaining, services and benefits available at the state and local level that address the needs of those caregivers residing in each county. The program shall provide to kinship caregivers information and referral services and assistance obtaining support services. Some of the services may include access to publicly funded child care, respite care, training for special needs children, legal services, as well as access to a toll-free number for additional assistance.

Unfortunately, this section of Ohio Revised Code is permissive and with local Jobs and Family Services feeling the burn on local dollars already, many counties have not been able to provide this permissive service. The hallmark of this legislation before you is to change that. We feel like



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it is necessary to create a system where all kinship caregivers have equitable access to these services. We do not feel like it is fair or just that a caregiver in one county, who has this

program, may have access to navigators, but caregivers in counties without these services are without the guidance and counselling needed to care for these children in what is the most traumatic and stressful moments of their lives. We can do better and must do better for our most vulnerable populations.

House Bill 126 requires the implementation of a statewide program of kinship navigators, but in order to efficiently and strategically create this program, the bill allows the Director of Jobs and Family Services one year after the effective date to adopt rules in accordance with this legislation. HB 126 would require a few basic guardrails in implementing this language. First, HB 126 requires the Director of ODJFS to establish a system of as few as 5 and up to 12 regions for the statewide program of kinship care navigators. Second, these regions shall be created with population, number of kinship caregivers, available kinship navigator expertise, as well as any other relevant factors that will be needed to create stable and functional navigator regions. Third, these navigators, like current law but mandatory in this bill, will provide information and referral services and assistance in obtaining support services for kinship caregivers within its region.

Finally, programs and policies come with a price tag, and this legislation requires the Director of ODJFS, not later than one year after the bill's effective date, to amend the state Title IV-A plan in order to provide federal funding for the kinship care navigators. The legislation further requires ODJFS to pay the full nonfederal share for the program and provides that a county department of job and family services or public children services agency is not responsible for the cost of the program. This is important because our locals are in need and have felt the pain of delivering vital local services to their constituents.

Government can do better and help its constituency and this bill takes us one step closer.

Thanks you Chairman Ginter and Members of the House Community and Family Advancement Committee for the opportunity to offer sponsor testimony for House Bill 126. I and my Joint Sponsor will answer any questions from the committee.