

Chair Ginter, Vice Chair Conditt, Ranking member Boyce and members of the committee,

My name is Tim Harless and I am the director of community outreach and programming for Richland County Children Services in north central Ohio.

A native of Mansfield, I have worked in child welfare for almost 28 years in a variety of capacities.

I am here today as a strong advocate for Kinship caregivers. Not only in Ohio, but nationally, as well. I am currently the co-president of the Ohio Grandparent Kinship Coalition and the lead for the Protect Ohio IV-E waiver Kinship strategy.

I would like to echo Mary's comments recognizing Representatives Boyd and Rezabeck for their support of Kinship families across the state of Ohio.

I do not need to repeat Mary's testimony. But I strongly believe Kinship families deserve and need our attention and support.

The fact is national studies demonstrate children are just as safe living with Kinship families as they are in traditional foster homes. I will also submit to you a document that shows how these non-traditional families are beneficial to children, and also to local child welfare agencies and the community as a whole.

During my almost three decades in child welfare, I have had the privilege to speak at several state conferences around Ohio.

I am consistently amazed at the number of Kinship care providers I encounter who are not aware of the benefits for which they may be eligible.

There should be community mapping done in every Ohio county. These would provide Kinship care families a tool to identify all available resources. Secondly, a 1-800 warm line would give every Kinship family a contact person in their own county to assist with other questions that may arise.

These are just some of the reasons I strongly support H.B. 126. I thank all of you for the opportunity to advocate for Ohio's Kinship families.

During my career working with families and children, I have seen how Kinship families may struggle in other states. I am continually reminded that Ohio is one of the best in providing positive services to empower families, both traditional and non-traditional.

I would welcome the opportunity to answer any questions the committee may have at this point.

Thank you.