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December 5th, 2017

House Community and Family Advancement Committee

House Bill 309

Interested Party/Proponent Testimony- The Ability Center of Greater Toledo

Chairman Ginter, Vice-Chair LaTourette, Ranking Member Boyd, and members of the House Community and Family Advancement Committee, thank you for considering my testimony today. My name is Valerie Novack. I am a Disability Rights Advocate with The Ability Center of Greater Toledo. We serve seven counties in Northwest Ohio. Our mission is to assist people with disabilities to live within a fully accessible community. For many, building a family, whether that is through birthing, fostering, or adopting children, is a crucial part of a full life. House Bill 309 aims to support parents and prospective parents with blindness to take hold of that right.

As it stands, Ohio Code lists disability as potential reasoning for removing a child from a home or preventing individuals from parenting if determined inadequate. However, disability alone does not make a person unable to provide a home. Disability should not be listed alongside factors including abuse, abandonment, drug use, and criminal history when determining a fit home (ORC § 2151.414). Unfortunately, those who might commit egregious actions against children cross all demographic lines and the ability to successfully parent should be based on those actions and not demographic factors such as disability.

The Ability Center serves people with a variety of disabilities in a variety of successful families. Some are parents with children, while many are young and still imagining what their future family will look like. Taking steps to remove discriminatory practices that endanger or prohibit a disabled person, blind or otherwise, from assuming the role of parenthood is a necessary step in recognizing the full personhood of Ohioans with disabilities. HB 309 will help break stigmas and stereotypes that maintain the idea that people with disabilities make deficient parents.

We support House Bill 309, but also challenge the House to not limit this language to just Blind Ohioans but also those with other disabilities whose families or dreams of families are at risk due to bias and discrimination written into Ohio Code.

Thank you,

Valerie Novack

Disability Rights Advocate

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