



**Public Testimony on HB 64: Main Operating Budget
Senate Finance Workforce Subcommittee
Tuesday, May 19, 2015**

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Chairman Beagle, Ranking Member Williams, and members of the Senate Finance Workforce Subcommittee; thank you for allowing me to offer testimony on House Bill 64.

I am Natalie Leek-Nelson, President and CEO of Providence House, a crisis nursery in Cleveland, Ohio celebrating its 34th year of service to over 7,000 infants and children in crisis. I've been head of the organization for nearly fourteen years and bring 25 years of experience in corporate and non-profit management to my role.

Providence House is Ohio's first licensed crisis nursery for infants and children and one of only two Crisis Care Facilities (Crisis Nurseries) licensed to provide services to at-risk children and families in Ohio. Our efforts focus on protecting children from abuse and neglect, empowering safe and self-sufficient parents, and offering an alternative to foster care for families with small children who are facing difficult times.

As you know, too many families struggle with poverty, homelessness, domestic violence and addiction. It is critical that a safe, voluntary option for infants and children exists for families seeking help. In Cuyahoga County, Providence House offers that option. In Lorain County, our constituents at Blessing House do this meaningful work. And other communities throughout the state are expressing interest in this service as well, including Cincinnati, Akron, Mansfield, and Dayton.

At Providence House, we believe that child abuse and neglect prevention is a community responsibility. And we know that Children can be protected. Families can be safely restored. The cycle of abuse and neglect can be stopped.

Founded in 1981, Providence House began offering services in its mission to provide a safe haven for children newborn through age ten who are in need of emergency care due to a family crisis which puts them at risk of child abuse or neglect. Today, Providence House provides free, voluntary, non-custodial care for up to 20 infants and children at a time and will soon open 10 more beds for children in crisis who also have medical conditions in our new Wellness Nursery.

Providence House serves children and families in five key program areas: children's emergency shelter, direct childcare, family case management and aftercare, parent support and education and family trauma services. Our programs are focused on abuse and neglect prevention and family preservation through direct services and intensive intervention.

Providence House has been licensed by the State of Ohio as a Crisis Nursery since 1990 through the Department of Job and Family Services. We have been a quality provider throughout our history and today represent one of the largest, longest-operating and most respected crisis nurseries in the nation. Nearly 300 children are currently supported through our program each year and more than 400 in total will be served with the Wellness Nursery open.

Nearly 100% of funding we receive for the crisis care provided to our children comes from voluntary contributions from individuals, foundations, groups and companies. Less than 7% of our \$2.6 million operating budget comes from state, county or federal funds.

As a referral-based agency, children are voluntarily admitted to Providence House by parents and guardians through recommendations from more than 30 community partner agencies, including:

- Area Hospitals
- Domestic Violence Shelters
- Cuyahoga County Dept of Children & Family Services
- Homeless Shelters
- Mental Health Agencies
- Emergency Hotlines

In the current fiscal year (10 month period):

- 404 inquiries for admission were made; 254 qualified for placement
- 215 children from 92 families were admitted into our care and provided nearly 3,000 days of care
- Average length of stay was 27 days

Of the children who came to Providence House:

- 100% were at risk of abuse/neglect/dependency
- 26% had a caregiver with a medical crisis
- 14% were homeless
- 9% had caregivers in treatment for substance abuse
- 7% had a caregiver with a mental health crisis
- 5% were victims of or witness to violence

Through Trauma Screening tools used at Providence House, we also know that a growing number of our parents and children have experienced significant trauma and violence prior to receiving our services. Of those that completed trauma screenings 28% of parents and 32% of children were victims of crime and violent traumas such as domestic violence, gun violence, robbery, physical, sexual or emotional abuse.

Crisis Nurseries like Blessing House and Providence House allow parents to voluntarily place their children into a safe setting while they work to resolve crises that are affecting their children's safety. These are not lost causes; just families who have nowhere to turn for the week, or month, or two that it will take to find housing, safety, treatment, or employment. It is unthinkable that a parent today must forfeit custody and lose their child because they are homeless, fleeing an abusive partner, inpatient for a medical procedure or seeking substance abuse treatment. But too often, this is the only recourse available to families facing these crises.

As a crisis nursery, Providence House concentrates on the immediate needs of children in crisis while we connect families to community agencies to address the needs of the parent and to resolve the crisis within the family. By working closely with partner agencies, social workers or the Department of Children's Services, we can share information and recommendations for the successful resolution of the family crisis – closing the holes in the safety net to ensure that families are stabilized, safe, and self-sufficient over the long-term.

The lifespan impact – and cost – of child maltreatment is staggering. Using current research on the outcomes for these children we can plot throughout their lives when they will drop out of school, become a teen parent, use drugs and alcohol, be diagnosed with a mental illness, become unemployed, homeless, incarcerated, and develop chronic illnesses. Over 30,000 Ohio children were substantiated for abuse or neglect just last year alone. The math is simple: knowing that a maltreated child represents public costs of more than \$200,000 over their lifetime we can estimate that over \$600 million will be spent to support just last year's "class" of maltreated children. And that's just last year's children. This year's and next year's children will cost as much or more if we don't intervene.

The direct and indirect costs of child abuse and neglect to the State of Ohio are over \$4 billion and nearly \$500 million in Cuyahoga County alone. An agency such as Providence House steps in *before* serious abuse or neglect occurs. They help to alleviate the crisis facing a family and align them with support services that will help keep the family together and children out of the system. Crisis Nurseries offer lifelong hope to these children and families by keeping them together and offering support before abuse and neglect occur or the intervention of law enforcement and child protection agencies is required.

At Providence House, 98% of our children were reunified with their parent or guardian in 2014 and the average length of stay for a child was only 32 days. This is:

- 77% higher than the rate of reunification for the State of Ohio in 91% less time
- 81% higher than the rate for Cuyahoga County in 95% less time

But the big question is: can children and families really maintain the safety and stability found through Crisis Nursery services over the long-term. Yes. In a long-term outcomes study conducted by Case Western Reserve University comparing our children to local foster care data we found that 82% of children served by Providence House were never substantiated for abuse/neglect or entered the foster care system ...even 4, 5, 6 years after being served. Knowing that the nearly 300 children we serve each year represent a savings of nearly \$15 million in local foster care costs annually, the value of our services goes beyond the human capital of children and families and represents a significant economic benefit for our community and the State of Ohio.

Imagine 3, 10, or even 88 nurseries – one for every county in Ohio - and the impact that this network of preventative services could have on the costs of care and the quality of children's lives in Ohio. Using the service figures for Providence House as a sample, the potential outcome is a staggering - \$450 Million Dollars a year could be saved with a state-wide network of crisis care facilities serving as the frontline of services for children and families in crisis – preventing long-term out of home placement, child abuse and neglect, and above all keeping families together with supportive services in place to ensure their success.

While the possibilities are endless and certainly worthy of exploration and the numbers of interested caregivers seeking crisis facility status are growing; we must ensure that those providing this type of care are able to do so.

Crisis Care Facilities fill a critical void in the child abuse prevention and family preservation continuum, and we believe that public funds should be devoted to state-licensed facilities like ours that are reducing public system and foster care involvement.

In the last budget, the legislature recognized the critical role we play by funding crisis care facilities for the first time. We are extremely grateful for that support. Due to increased demand, we are hopeful that you can build on the support that you have already provided. The bill, in its current form, dedicates \$300,000 for each year of the upcoming biennium to children's crisis care facilities. This support will help address many of our funding challenges over the upcoming biennium and ensure that we can serve the optimum number of children in crisis who need our services.

The portion of these funds that will be allocated to Providence House and Blessing House will significantly assist us in our efforts to offer support to children who are the most vulnerable to child abuse and neglect, before the abuse and costly subsequent foster care placement and adverse outcomes throughout these children's lives occur. These funds will be allocated based on the

number of beds in a licensed crisis nursery; offering not only Providence House and Blessing House support, but also others who choose to open these facilities in Ohio.

There are thousands of families across the State standing on the brink. And we are spending billions of dollars to support them. Now we have evidence that we can pull them back and offer a helping hand to guide them. We can keep children safe, in their parent's custody and prevent abuse and neglect.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak about HB 64 and the amendment to support Crisis Nurseries. Through your support we can continue to protect even more at-risk children, empower thousands of families in crisis, and truly be a State with safe communities for every child.

Thank you for your support of Crisis Nurseries, I am happy to answer any questions you may have.