



House Community and Family Advancement Committee
Proponent Testimony Sub HB126
May 23, 2018
Mary Wachtel, Director of Public Policy
Public Children Services Association of Ohio
37 W. Broad Street, Suite 1100
Columbus, OH 43215
mary@pcsao.org
614.224.5802

Chair Ginter, Vice-Chair LaTourette, Ranking Member Boyd and Members of the Committee, my name is Mary Wachtel and I am with the Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO). PCSAO is a membership driven association of Ohio's county Public Children Services Agencies (PCSAs) that advocates for and promotes child protection program excellence and sound public policy for safe children, stable families and supportive communities.

Grandparents, other relatives, and close family friends step up every day to raise children whose parents can no longer care for them—sometimes on a temporary basis, often on a long-term or permanent basis. This longstanding tradition, known as kinship care, helps protect children and maintains strong family, community and cultural connections. When children cannot remain safely with their parents, other family and friends can provide a sense of security, identity and belonging. Attachment A provides more details on the value of kinship care and need for a statewide kinship navigator program.

We testified in support of HB126 on May 17, 2017, almost exactly a year ago to the day. We are glad to see the bill moving again and are here today to support Sub HB126.

Since last year, several things have occurred to make this the right time to move this bill:

- Congress provided one-time funding, via the 2018 Kinship Navigator Grant, to help states develop kinship navigator programs as defined by the federal Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018. We encourage Ohio to apply for this funding to establish a robust planning process that includes a wide range of stakeholders such as kin caregivers, youth raised by kin, current navigators, and PCSAs.
- Federal reimbursement at a 50:50 match will soon be available for state kinship navigator programs that meet certain criteria. This funding option was included in the Family First Prevention Services Act passed within the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018.
- The number of children placed with relatives by public children services agencies continues to grow.

The planning grant and new funding outlined above provide a unique opportunity to get the kinship navigator program right and have resources to help sustain it. We believe Sub HB126 provides the vehicle for moving forward and the appropriate flexibility to ensure Ohio's design meets the criteria to qualify for federal match funding.

Please support Substitute HB126. Thank you.

ATTACHMENT A



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Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 126. We applaud Representatives Boyd and Rezabek for their leadership on behalf of kinship caregivers. I will focus my brief remarks on the important role that kinship caregivers play in caring for their relative children and why this legislation is important. My colleagues, Tim Harless and Patrick Donovan, will focus more specifically on services that kinship caregivers need, including navigation.

Grandparents, other relatives, and close family friends step up every day to raise children whose parents can no longer care for them—sometimes on a temporary basis, often on a long-term or permanent basis. This longstanding tradition, known as kinship care, helps protect children and

maintains strong family, community and cultural connections. When children cannot remain safely with their parents, other family and friends can provide a sense of security, identity and belonging.

The majority of children living in kinship families have no children services involvement. Census data show that over 100,660 Ohio grandparents are raising grandchildren in our state (2014); many more children are being raised by relatives other than grandparents.

Ohio's county public children services agencies (PCSAs) also depend on kin to care for abused and neglected children. This is especially true now that we are in the throes of an opiate crisis and seeing more and more children come into contact with children services because of parental drug abuse.

For PCSAs, kinship placements can be "formal", meaning a child in agency custody is placed with an approved kinship caregiver as opposed to a foster home or a group home. Twenty-one percent (almost 2900) of the 13,719 children in custody statewide on July 1, 2016 were living with kinship caregivers.

Many more Ohio children who come to the attention of the child protective services system are diverted from entering agency custody by being placed with kin as an alternative to foster care. We typically call this "informal" kinship because the agency does not hold custody. While we do not know the precise number of informal kin placements, it is widely believed to exceed the number of formal kin placements.

Regardless of how children come to be placed with kin, kinship care provides them with a sense of stability, identity and belonging, especially during times of crisis. Imagine a child who must be removed from her mother – the trauma and loss that go along with that separation. Now imagine the difference for that child if she is leaving her mother's home to go live with her grandmother or aunt, versus going to live in a foster home with a new family she has never met.

Kinship families value the rewards of caregiving, but many also experience hardship by taking on the full-time care of additional children. Census data show that kinship caregivers are more likely to be poor, single, older, less educated, and unemployed than families in which at least one parent is present.¹ This means that meaningful support is critical to helping maintain children with kinship families.

Many kinship caregivers do not know what helps and support are available. HB126 would help remedy that by establishing a statewide kinship navigator program to provide guidance, information and referral, and help obtaining services for which these caregivers are eligible. I can personally attest to the value of such a program as PCSAO receives frequent phone calls from kinship families who are struggling to care for the child or children they have taken in. Many of these families that I talk to do not know where to turn for help and are struggling. They want to keep doing the right thing and need help.

Due to limited resources, only a handful of counties currently provide any type of kinship navigation services. This legislation would ensure that such assistance is available throughout Ohio. We do have one request for amending the bill and that is to include language to establish an advisory group to work with ODJFS as they design and implement the program. There is great collective wisdom and experience throughout our state on working with kinship caregivers, within county PCSAs as well as within other partner organizations and entities. Ensuring that wisdom is at the table as the program is being developed is essential.

We thank Rep.'s Boyd and Rezabek for bringing this legislation forward and look forward to working with them and you for successful passage. Thank you and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

¹ Population Reference Bureau's analysis of the 2009, 2010, and 2011 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Surveys.