

Health Committee  
February 14, 2018  
Proponent Testimony HB 302

Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Gavarone and members of the Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of the Minor Maternal Healthcare Act, House Bill 302.

My name is Ann Bischoff, CEO of Star House. Our center is dedicated to finding and engaging the estimated 2,000 youth, ages 14-24, who are experiencing homelessness in central Ohio. In 2017, we served 996 individuals. These young people are by-and-large estranged from their immediate families.

We know that half of these youth were in foster care and likely have no support from parents while transitioning into adulthood. Others have run away from abusive and neglectful homes. One-third have experienced intimate partner abuse, which suggests cases of human trafficking. The population is highly susceptible to exploitation, because too often no one is looking for them. A quarter of this population identify LGBTQ and have been ostracized from their families. All of these statistics point to one thing: lack of trust. These young people have far too often been let down by the adults in their lives who were meant to love and support them. As a result, many would rather fend for themselves in the shadows of our society— sleeping in cars, parking garages, tents, abandoned homes and couch-surfing— than reach out for help.

They prefer a place like Star House with immediate access to basic needs and the opportunity to connect with therapy, health care and stabilizing housing, employment and transportation resources at one site. Forty-seven percent of the homeless youth we served in 2017 are female. Of those, 39 are female minors who are especially vulnerable. They are truly hiding and too often do not want to be reconnected with their abusive parent or guardian. Recently, a young woman experiencing homelessness shared with me the horror of her upbringing. She was physically and sexually abused by her parents who also acted as her pimp. She ran away as a teen and has been living on the streets ever since. Most recently, she was staying in an abandoned home, nailing wooden planks across the door with a make-shift hammer each night,

just to gain enough peace to sleep. Imagine if this young woman became pregnant and at the doctor's office or the hospital, *she* was required to get permission from her parents to receive prenatal care or to receive care while in labor.

There are minors in our society who have no acting, supportive guardian. The practice of requiring them to seek a signature from a nonexistent person is unreasonable. House Bill 302 would enable minor mothers to access life-giving prenatal and labor and delivery care and has the potential to reduce infant mortality.

As we know, there is a high level of infant mortality in our region. Each week, two to three infants die in Franklin County. Given that the number one risk factor of infant mortality is homelessness, the children of the youth we serve at Star House are at great risk. According to a 2013 study, mothers ages 19 and younger in Ohio have the highest rate of infant mortality compared to other age groups in the state. That is, 11.3 of 1,000 births for young mothers, compared to 7.7 for mothers in their 20s, 6.4 for mothers in their 30s, 10.8 for mothers 40 and older, and 7.6 across the board. The infant mortality rate for mothers 19 and under nationwide is 8.6 in 1,000 births.

The Minor Maternal Health Care Act can be expected to directly address infant mortality. Thank you for seeking to make informed decisions to benefit pregnant minors and their children. I am happy to answer questions.