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Testimony on HB49
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Hello and thank you for this opportunity to share our story and to speak out for the children in foster care in Ohio.

I am Leah Clevenger. My husband Patrick works for Cornerstone Construction and also serves as a worship pastor at the church we attend. I am a stay at home mom and part time secretary. We have three sons, two biological and 1 adopted. We have been foster/adoptive parents for 9 years which has involved 5 foster children in our care. We are licensed through South Central Ohio Job and Family Services.

Benjamin our youngest son we fostered from birth and then were able to adopt him close to his 2nd birthday. Our most recent foster daughter Cinamyn will soon be aging out of the system, graduating from High School with honors and going on to attend Ohio University.

One of the joys we have is leading a small group called puRE which is a support group for foster and adoptive parents. What we are sharing from our own experience as foster parents is similar to what others share with us.

Benjamin our adopted son was drug exposed at birth. His birth mom overdosed twice while pregnant. The 2nd time is what sent her into labor. He spent 5 ½ weeks in the hospital while they were trying to wean him with morphine. We brought him home and the next 8 months were the toughest 8 months of our life. We were in no way prepared for what he had to deal with. He could not soothe himself like most babies can. We swaddled, rocked, bounced, paced the floors, held him in every position, nothing seemed to work. He only would sleep for short periods of time. The rough times came at night for him because that's when his bio mom would do drugs. After that 8 month things started slowly to improve. He stayed with us until we adopted him at 2 years old. Today he is the most active 5 year old we know. He has some sensory issues. He gets overstimulated easily and it becomes hard for him to focus. Overall he is doing very well, his preschool teachers say he is good in school and hitting all his marks—and he is graduating tomorrow.

We always had a special place in our heart for his birth mother. When she made the decision to allow us to adopt him we were glad that we were able to meet with her and have a wonderful conversation. A year and a half after we adopted Benjamin we were contacted early one Sunday morning that his biological mother was rushed to the hospital with a brain aneurysm. The family asked for us to come to the hospital, and we did. Sorry to say that she did not make

it and passed away later that day. My husband was honored to be able to preside over the funeral services. What tough but great memories to be able to share with Benjamin. At times Benjamin still has hard moments when his little mind begins to think of his first Mom. We never were able to have a relationship with his first Dad.

Every child that we have had in our home has been due to bio parents being on drugs. This impacts their lives greatly. They don't have stable home environment, parents, healthy meals, they are exposed to dangerous situations, behind in education, health & trust issues. For instance, we know that these children are not fed correctly or regularly because when they come to our homes they are starving and they hoard food. When they start doing weekend visits from our homes going to biologicals they come back to us starved. We have friends that are in school education and they inform us that many of these children who have drug addicted parents are deprived of their basic needs (food, clean clothes, personal hygiene, attending school regularly). We know that many of these children know too much about drugs and even how to administer them from watching others do them in their presence.

The older ones deal with a lot of horrifying memories of their parents and loved ones committing terrible acts of crime in front of them. As we all know the people that do drugs do other things too. It leads to selling drugs, selling their bodies, stealing and other awful acts. The placement we have now has been exposed to thievery, her mom being arrested and being homeless. This young lady actually asked her supervisor to contact the authorities and inform them to what was going on in her home. It's hard for these young people to picture having a better life when they are left in these environments. Stable families build stable lives for children.

I do want to say that we believe in reunification and we understand the tension between healthy caregiving and biologicals raising their own children. If healthy foster parents struggle as much as we do in raising these drug-affected babies/children how much more difficult is it for biological parents who are struggling with addictions, legalities, housing, employment, and relational issues to care for these children. The plain fact is we believe all sides are uneducated on many different levels. The courts don't understand the challenges that bios will face when they are to take custody of these drug affected children again. Foster parents are not well enough prepared to receive these children into their homes (this is not saying anything against Children Services). It's important that you hear us say that foster parents need more training for these infants born "affected". We had no idea what we were getting into.

Recently we attended a training by Ronna Johnson. We discussed the need for a comprehensive supportive service which would involve nursing and medical professionals who specialize in the care of drug affected children. Also establish family/friend mentor from the community which hopefully would be some of us who have fostered these children, and of course the parents who are in recovery. We have come to know there is a lot more we can learn for how to take care of these infants and what services are available for these children. We really enjoyed this class and think that more foster parents and family members should get the same type of training and help. We believe this would bring about the best care for these children long term. We are hoping that more funding would be made available for services like

these so our county and other places across the state can help children and families affected by the drug epidemic. Healthy people raise healthy children.

Thank you for this opportunity for us to share our hearts for the children in care. We are first and foremost for the children in our city, county and our state. We must pour our time, resources and hearts into these children to break cycles they have been exposed to.