



Ohio Children's Alliance

Leading change for child and family service providers

Ohio Senate
Finance Health and Medicaid Subcommittee

May 15, 2019

Testimony on HB 166

Witness: Mark Mecum, CEO, Ohio Children's Alliance

Chairman Hackett, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on HB 166.

My name is Mark Mecum; I am the CEO of the Ohio Children's Alliance. Founded in 1973 as Ohio's first statewide child advocacy organization, the Ohio Children's Alliance provides leadership for Ohio's at-risk children, families, and community agencies. Our membership is composed of 76 agencies throughout Ohio that provide foster care and behavioral health services to over 100,000 children and family members each year.

Our Alliance is very supportive of the House-passed version of HB 166. We respectfully request the Senate to:

- 1) preserve the proposed child welfare and behavioral health investments, and
- 2) ensure our state government is positioning communities in the right way to strengthen families and prevent children from entering foster care.

The community agencies that comprise the Ohio Children's Alliance are change-makers in their communities. They are on the front lines of the opiate crisis, they provide treatment to parents, strengthen families with evidence-based programming, keep kids safe in foster care, and facilitate adoptions and other forms of permanency. They are also preparing Ohio's next class of foster care alumni for bright futures through Ohio's new *Bridges* program. They are at the center of Ohio's health care and social service delivery system for vulnerable families. Collectively, we offer a unique and important view of HB 166.

We are grateful and proud of the proposed investments in children services in the Executive and House-passed budget. Maintaining the investments will assist our child protection system to keep pace with the historic influx of children while also

educate | advocate | innovate | connect

improving their ability to secure treatment and supports. As you heard from the ODJFS Director's testimony, "*Perhaps no group has suffered more than our children as a result of the opioid epidemic.*" We couldn't agree more, and we hope this special population continues to remain a priority.

There are two additional policy strategies that we request the Senate explore that address critical issues facing families, communities and our state.

First, we must ensure that parents never have to make a voluntary decision to relinquish custody of their children to access behavioral health services. While we are proud of the many excellent community programs that assist families and "multi-system youth," there are barriers to accessing these services, which includes paying for the out-of-pocket costs of residential treatment stays. (These costs are only *partially* covered by Medicaid and health insurance). The added funding in HB 166 for child protection agencies (ODJFS) and multi-system youth (ODJFS and ODM) will help families facing custody relinquishment, but it won't fully alleviate it from happening. Families will still need direct access to financial resources to pay for their children's behavioral health treatment. An additional investment to Ohio's Family and Children First Councils (OMHAS) is critical to preventing these families from reaching the brink.

Second, Ohio is planning its implementation of the federal Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA). This federal law provides an opportunity for Ohio to access millions of federal dollars to empower families and prevent custody relinquishment and must be implemented within two years. Ohio will miss out on the opportunity to access FFPSA funding if we do not build capacity among community agencies to offer *FFPSA-eligible evidence-based services*. An assessment of Ohio shows that our agencies do not yet operate many *FFPSA-eligible* programs. A new investment to ODJFS to prepare community agencies for FFPSA is critical to preventing custody relinquishment and to stem the tide of children entering foster care.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of HB 166.

Mark Mecum
CEO, Ohio Children's Alliance
mark.mecum@ohiochildrensalliance.org
614-461-0014 x2

educate | advocate | innovate | connect