



**Testimony on Sub H.B. 166: Main Operating Budget for FY 2020-2021**  
**Senate Finance Subcommittee on Health and Medicaid**  
**Natalie A. Leek-Nelson, President and CEO**

**Wednesday, May 15, 2019**

Chairman Hackett, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Thomas and members of the Subcommittee, my name is Natalie Leek-Nelson, President and CEO of Providence House, the state's first licensed children's crisis nursery located in Cleveland. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on Substitute House Bill 166.

Across Ohio, there is broad recognition that we are facing a foster care crisis. Last year, nearly 27,000 children were placed out of home - over 3,000 more than in 2016. Our communities are struggling to find foster families and public children service agencies are often forced to look beyond their county and even state borders to find foster homes. Many children entering foster care are very young - over 25% are 3 years old and younger. Beyond the trauma for a child removed from their parent, mothers who lose custody of their children have higher rates of mental illness, substance abuse, and their death by suicide is 4x higher.

The foster care crisis is also expensive. The annual cost of placing children in foster care has risen 40% over the past five years. These costs will continue to grow if we do not shift our focus on programs that prevent child maltreatment and help parents retain custody of their children.

My goal today is to raise your awareness and support for crisis nurseries as proven early intervention services that strengthen and preserve families, support healthy child development, and reduce foster care placements - which can save tens of millions of dollars in foster care costs across our state with your help.

For nearly 40 years, Providence House has worked to keep kids safe and families together. We are licensed as a children's crisis care facility by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services and are a trusted community resource that has cared for and reunited over 8,000 children and families.

We work with parents who are struggling to meet their children's basic needs, require medical, mental health, or substance abuse treatment, are homeless, or fleeing domestic violence. 75% of the families we serve have history with child protective services and fear that will lose custody of their children if they seek help. So, they come to us.

We provide free, noncustodial shelter to children newborn to 12 years old and partner with parents to address family crises, strengthen parenting skills, and wrap and connect resources and services around each family to ensure positive, permanent change for the whole family.

Our multi-generational approach focused on both the child and caregiver works. Last year 99% of the children who stayed with us were reunited with their parent after an average stay of 24 days – this is an 89% higher rate of reunification than foster care in 95% less time.

And families stay together - an external evaluation of our families conducted by Case Western Reserve University found that 82% of the children we serve were not placed in foster care – even 3-5 years after our services. We are receiving national recognition for our success. This year, Providence House was recognized by the U.S. Children's Bureau as a Children's Champion for Preventing Child Maltreatment.

Knowing the average cost annually for each child in foster care is \$25,782, our services saved nearly \$9 million in foster care costs in Cuyahoga County last year alone. Factor in additional costs for higher need children and this figure quadruples to nearly \$30 million. Imagine the impact and savings if 5, 10, 20 or more Ohio counties had a crisis nursery to help prevent parents from needing to relinquish custody to foster care.

In the last budget, funding for crisis nurseries was cut in half to just \$150,000 annually while in the same period two new crisis nurseries opened: Brigid's Path in Kettering and St. Joseph's Orphanage in Hamilton. This reduction in state support forced our Ohio crisis nursery community to reduce our capacity, limiting our ability to serve growing numbers of children in crisis.

For Ohio's existing and future crisis nurseries, the main barrier to opening and serving the optimal number of families is funding. We are grateful to have received state support in previous budget cycles; however, the vast majority of our funding, nearly 85%, comes through philanthropic contributions. **Sub House Bill 166 currently includes \$150,000 each fiscal year to be shared by Ohio's crisis care facilities. I ask that you consider increasing this line item to \$750,000 each fiscal year to support all of Ohio's crisis nurseries.**

As in previous budget cycles, I am here asking for your support to grow the fund for all crisis nurseries in Ohio, rather than advocating for an earmark for Providence House. I continue to believe this is the best policy as additional crisis nurseries are expected to open with champions in Columbus and Toledo in this biennium.

While much attention and support has rightly been given to recruiting new kin and foster families in Ohio, I ask that you give that same support and attention to programs that keep kids out of foster care – programs like crisis nurseries that are already helping Ohio's families stay safely together. Your investment in crisis nurseries will not only demonstrate your commitment to preserving families – it will align Ohio with the federal

Family First Prevention Services Act passed by Congress in 2018 - and generate millions in savings for child welfare and foster care costs in Ohio.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you about Sub House Bill 166 and our request for support of the vital work done by crisis nurseries to keep hundreds of children safe and their families together while bringing significant cost savings to the state. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.