

TUSCARAWAS COUNTY CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT AGENCY



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Senate Finance Committee
May 28, 2019
Testimony of Traci Berry, Esq.
Director, Tuscarawas County CSEA
HB166

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Burke, Ranking Member Sykes and Members of the Committee, my name is Traci Berry and I am the Director of the Tuscarawas County Child Support Enforcement Agency (CSEA) and the 2019 President of the Ohio CSEA Directors' Association (OCDA). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 166. We come to you today to ask for your support of amendment SC3350, which increases the Child Support-Local Allocation (line item 600502) by \$3 million.

County Child Support Agencies are on the front lines in providing services to over one million children in Ohio. We are much more than a collection agency. We work diligently every day to establish paternity, establish and enforce child and medical support orders, locate parents, and modify orders when family circumstances have changed. However, our county agencies are facing many obstacles in serving our families.

Traci A Berry

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You have heard testimony regarding the increasing number of children in kinship care or in care of county children service agencies. They are our children too. Tuscarawas County CSEA has seen a 4% increase in caretaker relatives requesting our services since 2014. Over 1,100 caretaker relatives have child support orders in our county. These grandparents, aunts, uncles and adult siblings come to us for help for the children they are caring for in their homes. These are difficult cases with multiple families and a variety of needed services. Oftentimes we must first locate the parents and establish legal paternity before we can begin to establish orders to get the needed support into these caretaker homes where children are residing.

Tuscarawas County CSEA helps over 24,000 men, women, and children. We have changed our approach recently to make an often difficult 18+ year relationship with our families less intimidating and more customer-friendly from our first contact. We greet new parents and caregivers personally and arm them with the information and knowledge necessary to navigate the child support system and to make the best decisions for their unique situations. We've been recognized across the state for our approach. Each month we distribute over \$1 million in child support to the families in our county. It's our people who make this work because they are parents and relative caregivers too.

But we are at a crossroads. Many of our counties are operating with less money due to a change in our funding formula last year. Tuscarawas County was one of the counties who lost funding with the change in the allocation methodology for state dollars. We lost 24% of our state funding; funding necessary to serve our families. Funding that is utilized to bring in matching federal dollars at a 66% rate. We are also facing rising costs for technology and personnel. We have a digital filing system that's more microfiche than useful. Tuscarawas County CSEA is taking advantage of the Enterprise Document Management System (EDMS), which is an imaging system to increase efficiencies across the state, but to do so I was forced to choose between replacing a retiring employee or buying into EDMS. The EDMS will not do her job. Her job is to conduct support order modifications and explain that process to families. It's something that cannot be automated. Yet the statewide document management system will enable employees to keep track of the necessary paperwork in a more effective and efficient manner. Our copiers and scanners are too old to talk to

the new system so they must be replaced. We need more outreach to the public, the private bar and the courts, but do not have the personnel to further these key relationships. We want to take advantage of simple things such as text message reminders of hearings, but we cannot afford the software. We cannot provide help for our families without adequate funding.

Counties across Ohio are forced to choose between customer service and upgrading equipment, technology advancement and staffing levels necessary to do the work our families need. If our program isn't appropriately funded, we will fail our children. Paternity will not be established, support will not be collected, and back support will go unpaid. Please help us prevent this oncoming crisis.

We ask that you maintain mandatory language included in the House-passed version of HB166 with regard to child support policy. These provisions include: 3119.023, 3119.05 (I)(5), (J), and (O), 3119.27, 3119.29, 3119.30, 3119.302, 3119.31, 3119.32, and 3125.25. Ohio is required to adopt these provisions as a condition of our State Plan, and failure to do so would put the TANF block grant at risk.

Child Support is key to over one million children in Ohio and county CSEAs are essential to these children. We do not believe that Ohio can have a budget focused on families and children without looking to make an investment in the Child Support Program. We ask for your support in increasing our Child Support-Local Allocation by \$3 million in this budget by supporting amendment SC3350.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions.