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Families, Aging, and Human Services Committee

House Bill 265

Chair Manchester

Vice-Chair Cutrona

Ranking Member Liston

And Members of the Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to share the thoughts of the staff at Blessing House in Lorain County in support of House Bill 265. My name is Sister Mary Berigan and with me today is Donna Humphrey. Together we founded Blessing House and we continue today in the roles of Executive Director and Development Manager.

Earlier this week I was fortunate to take part in an interview with a young woman that we have helped in the past. She came to our door last fall, wearing her mask and holding a picture of a young girl in a holiday dress standing in front of a Christmas tree. Staff told me that a young woman was at the door looking for a child. As soon as I went to the door, I realized that the picture she was holding was her as a 6-year-old child. She is now 21 and that picture was the only picture she had from her childhood. Over the past 8 months we have spoken many times. She has told her story of needing a place when her grandmother caretaker was dealing with cancer. She came to know Blessing House as a safe place where she was cared for with love. She admitted this week that it took her several years to realize that the women who cared for her so well were actually doing a job. She thought they were just there to “share love with the kids”. Today this young woman has a job, is enrolled in classes at Lorain Community College and volunteers with junior high girls to build their self-esteem.

To date almost 1600 children have found safety and security at Blessing House since we opened our doors in 2005. Our children have ranged in age from 2 days old to those ready to celebrate their 13th birthday. The children come primarily from Lorain County, but have we have also welcomed children from seven other Northeast Ohio counties. Currently we are licensed by ODJFS for 10 children in our original location. We have just completed the construction of a 16,730 square foot building which will

allow us to accommodate 28 children. We are waiting for the word that we can move from the original house to our new space.

Our mission has always been about providing for the safe care of our children. Blessing House began as an outgrowth of our experience volunteering with the CASA program in Lorain County. Our hope was to allow parents an opportunity to address the needs of the family while we assumed the care for their children thus leading to keeping the family together when appropriate.

No longer do we see families who come with a single concern but rather our discussions uncover family history and parent trauma that places the children at risk. Parents and caregivers address a variety of issues: domestic violence, physical health and medical treatment, substance abuse treatment, mental health issues and homelessness. The parent/caregiver voluntarily places the children in our care so they care so they can focus on those issues that are affecting the family.

At the time of intake, we draw up a plan with the parent/caretaker to spell out the needs of the children being placed at Blessing House. These needs may include medical follow ups, partnering with local agencies who assess developmental needs or maintaining placement in school. To date we have transported children to and from 99 different schools so they may continue to benefit from an educational setting that is best for them. There is no cost to the family to provide the care offered at Blessing House.

At intake we also delineate the various steps the parent/caretaker needs to take in order to prepare for the children to return home. Staff members provide parenting support, mentoring and act as a liaison to other community resources the family may need. Staff members accompany parents/caregivers to court, to seek benefits, to school meetings and to medical appointments for the children. Our trauma specialist is available to work with children to better understand how family trauma has affected the child and their development.

Blessing House works collaboratively with local agencies to provide safe care for children as well as support for their families. We work closely with Lorain County Children Services to support families that have become involved with the agency by providing immediate safety for children and support services for their parents and caregivers. We become a trusted part of the safety net these families need as they deal with economic, mental and physical health and relationship issues. Our working relationship with Children Services has helped stabilize families and prevented children from going into foster care. It has also helped with transitions when out of home placement was the only option, allowing Children Services the time they needed to provide safe placement with a relative or other appropriate caregiver.

Our three state licensed Children's Crisis Care Centers have operated during this last pandemic year as we always have – focusing on the needs of families in crisis, providing safe care for children and adapting to circumstances that are challenging and ever changing. We have been able to do so because of the quality of care that we provide, the leadership within our organizations and the dedication to our missions. We believe this legislation will further enhance the quality of the services provided, expand opportunities for others who want to duplicate our models and provide needed flexibility to manage operations efficiently and effectively.

House Bill 265 provides the necessary flexibility for a crisis care facility to develop according to the needs of the community it serves. Each county in Ohio faces many similar issues but to different degrees of impact. The impact of House Bill 265 would support the growth of the distinct models of crisis care facilities. The new statutory recognition of the Residential Infant Care Centers acknowledges the important efforts to care for the youngest victims of substance abuse.

Blessing House aligns with the Family Preservation Center model to best serve our area. Our current programming falls in line with the requirements and our new building incorporates physical space and items that support the efforts of family preservation. Other aspects of the Bill would support the day-to-day efforts to enrich the care of our children. Allowing staff members, interns and volunteers who are childcare trained to step into the mix when needed and become part of the care team will serve to enhance the child's experience. Increasing the number of consecutive days that a child may stay with us allows adequate time for parents/caregivers to address family needs.

We appreciate the efforts of Representative Manning and Representative Patton to sponsor this Bill. We ask your support to keep all of Ohio moving ahead as we seek to care for the most vulnerable among us. Please feel free to ask any questions. Thank you for your consideration of House Bill 265 as an important step forward in caring for Ohio's children.

Respectfully,

Sister Mary Berigan SND

Executive Director

Blessing House

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