



Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 110. My name is Jessica Walters I am the President and CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Cleveland. I am also a former Little Sister. I am here today on behalf of the Ohio Statewide Association of Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies. I

I have come before you today in both recognition and gratitude – recognition for the support from the State of Ohio for the past 8 years, and gratitude for this investment in our children. The Little Brothers and Little Sisters we work with face many barriers – in the Cleveland area alone, over 50% of the kids participating in our program have experienced the incarceration of a close family member. Other common experiences include poverty, housing instability, single-parent households, educational inequality, familial substance abuse. Because of your continued support, we are well-positioned to provide structure, support, ongoing training, and other vital resources and services to volunteer “Bigs”, “Littles” and their families in order to develop and sustain the positive, trusting, and long-lasting relationships that have never been more important or necessary than during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Allow me to begin by illustrating the journey we have been on for the last two years. The General Assembly included in House Bill 166, \$1 million of funding over the FY 19/20 biennium for Big Brothers Big Sisters’ “to provide mentoring services to children throughout the state who have experienced trauma in their lives, including parental incarceration.”

During the past two years, Ohio Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies made over 440 mentoring relationships for children who have experienced trauma. In light of our history of powerful outcomes and practiced ability to ensure that state dollars go directly to children and families who need them, we are seeking approval of our earmarked \$1 million per fiscal year. This funding will allow Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) to provide mentors to 834 additional children over two years.

Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) is extremely appreciative of the introduced version of House bill 110, which includes funding in the amount of \$1 million per fiscal year for Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies across Ohio to facilitate strong mentoring

relationships between children and caring volunteers to youth throughout the state who have experienced adversity. As experts in trauma-informed care and providers focused on social-emotional skill development, we appreciate the ways that youth wellness has been placed at the forefront during this cycle, evidenced not only by the inclusion of Big Brothers Big Sisters but also by the expansion of the Student Wellness and Success Fund. Over the last two years, some of this funding has been used to bring our mentoring programs to new School Districts in areas across the state.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Ohio will continue to act as the fiscal agent for the statewide funding. The funds will continue to be distributed to local BBBS agencies as matches are made. We have created an efficient and effective statewide program with no duplication of administrative costs, allowing maximum funding to go to the children and families we serve.

Even in the best of times, youth in Big Brothers Big Sisters' programs are facing adversity at a higher rate than the average young person in Ohio. And while the current crisis is affecting everyone, it is hitting the young people and families we serve the hardest:

This current crisis has created a collective trauma for all of us, but as we begin to focus on recovery our work will become even more important. For our children to move through the crisis moments created by the pandemic, BBBS mentors and staff members are already helping their mentees:

- Cope with loss of friends or family members from COVID-19
- Rebuild social skills that may have atrophied during isolation
- Process their 2020 experiences

These experiences can have lasting negative effects on mental health and physical well-being throughout life.

As this crisis continues, we know that our children and families are feeling lasting, profound effects that will require long-term engagement and support. Our work could not be more urgent as it protects against the harmful impacts of adverse childhood experiences, and helps young people process childhood trauma and develop the resiliency needed to move into successful futures. Our evidence-based mentoring programs provide children with enduring relationships that are essential to social, emotional and mental health. These relationships are essential to supporting youth development during and after this pandemic.

At Big Brothers Big Sisters, our dedication to young people IS an essential service. Over the past few months, our volunteers and supporters have stepped up in a BIG way.

We have adapted our service delivery to make new mentoring relationships and ensure that kids stay virtually connected to their mentors during the COVID-19 crisis. Our pre-match interviews and match introductory meetings with volunteers are taking place through virtual platforms such as Zoom. Our pre-match trainings for mentors are being presented through webinars. In Cleveland, we utilized some funding from the Cleveland Foundation's COVID-19 Rapid Response efforts to give direct financial support to families, providing food and school supplies, and connecting them to other community resources.

We are sharing activity ideas, such as virtual college tours, a social-emotional learning activity of the day, and creating a COVID-19 time capsule, with our Bigs and Littles. Our goal is to keep matches connected and provide our Littles with opportunities to stimulate learning and foster their social-emotional growth.

We also worked diligently this spring to keep our School-based Bigs and Littles connected while school was not in session. Avenues for these connections include pen pal letters, three-way calls, and virtual meet-ups – all facilitated by a BBBS match support specialist. We have seen Bigs and Littles have free throw contests and play Uno together through their virtual meetings

Our Youth Outcomes Survey was developed by some of the top mentoring researchers in the country for use by BBBS affiliates. The survey examines eight areas of impact of mentoring relationships:

- Academic Performance/Grades
- Attitudes towards Risky Behaviors
- Educational Expectations
- Family Connectedness/Parental Trust
- Juvenile Justice System Involvement
- Presence of a Special/Very Important Adult (other than parent/guardian)
- School Attendance
- Social Acceptance/Competence

The results of the Youth Outcomes Surveys for 2019-20 exceeded our goal for this program. Ninety-eight percent (98%) of youth in our one-to-one mentoring programs reported improving or consistently maintaining in at least three of the eight outcome areas listed above in 2019-20.

As we look ahead, because of the 8 years of support from the State of Ohio, we will be able to provide powerful mentoring relationships to 834 youth, who have not only contended daily with adverse experiences, but also faced heightened levels of trauma due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial injustices across our nation.

Bringing our evidence-based programs to children who have experienced trauma is life-changing. As our 2019-20 outcomes data reaffirms, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Ohio and our BBBS partner agencies have a proven track record of delivering high-quality, impactful, one-to-one mentoring relationships to this vulnerable population.

At Big Brothers Big Sisters, we believe that every child, no matter what obstacles they face, has potential. Our job is not to create potential. Rather, we DEFEND, IGNITE AND EMPOWER that potential. Together we are clearing a path to a child's biggest possible future. We greatly appreciate your time and attention today. Please support funding for Big Brothers Big Sisters contained in HB 110, thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.