

TESTIMONY OF CHILD FOCUS
OHIO HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE
Sub. H.B. 110
APRIL 15, 2021

Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony to you today. My name is Tara Keith, Marketing & Development Officer for Child Focus.

Child Focus is a nonprofit organization that strengthens the quality of life for 20,000 individuals in central and southern Ohio across 22 counties by developing thriving kids, strong families and successful adults.

In operation since 1977, Child Focus serves at-risk children and adults who live in poverty, have family dysfunction, involvement in foster or kinship care, are impacted by the criminal justice system, and have experienced physical and verbal abuse, trauma, mental health and substance use issues.

Child Focus administers three main programs: Early Learning, Behavioral Health, and Foster Care. Each program is accredited by Step Up to Quality or Commission on Accreditation for Rehabilitation Facilities, quality rating standards that exceed licensing standards.

Child Focus has worked relentlessly through COVID, never closing. Every day, I heard heroic stories about how Child Focus impacted the lives of those we serve: responding to 2AM crisis hotline calls and mobile crisis runs, placing traumatized children into safe, caring foster homes, delivering meals to combat food insecurity while schools were closed, providing support to law enforcement and individuals in the jails and juvenile detention and providing “just in time” emergency mental health treatment to individuals on the brink of suicide.

There is a great need for these programs in our communities to help families who are struggling, and that need has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Child Focus’ continued work is reliant upon having adequate resources to maintain these programs and to serve even more families.

I am here to provide testimony in support of an amendment to H.B. 110, championed by Rep. Jean Schmidt, that would earmark \$1 million in each fiscal year to support programs that:

- Stabilize families through parent education and basic needs assistance for rental/utilities/gas and food;
- Provide behavioral health services for at risk children and adults through therapy programs in schools and community;
- Expand preschool child care and before & after school care K-5 scholarships; and

- Support our workforce and life skill development programs that enhance and teach the hard and soft skills for those looking for employment, increasing and improving their employment options as a tool to provide stability and lift struggling families out of poverty.

The TANF Block Grant earmark dollars we are requesting will help fund the types of programs that the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program was designed to address. These dollars will assist families with children when the parents or other responsible relatives cannot provide for the family's basic needs. It will help needy families end dependency on government benefits and encourage and maintain families.

Our commitment to improve the lives of Ohio's most vulnerable citizens is heartfelt and that commitment starts at the top. Our CEO, Pamela Lindeman, was in the public child welfare system through age 7. She credits the Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services for the "life-changing" care and opportunity she was given. This experience inspired Pamela to give back by entering the social work field, earning a Bachelor's of Social Work degree from the University of Cincinnati and a Master's degree in Community Mental Health from Xavier University. Pamela completed her clinical residency at Child Focus and in 2019 she became CEO, where she leads my organization with a heart and passion for children and families.

Let me share with you a few examples of some of the success we have had in recent years in transforming the lives of at risk children into successful adults.

- Elizabeth was referred to our workforce development program by another Child Focus parent and set both a full-time job and a High School Diploma goals. Within 8 months Elizabeth's life turned around. She was working a full-time position with Tyson Foods, and had earned her High School Diploma. Our Work Readiness programs provided Elizabeth with hours of study sessions through Zoom and through her efforts she earned her High School Diploma and became gainfully employed and continues to provide for her family.
- A 16-year-old male was referred to Child Focus by the Clermont County Juvenile Probation Office due to truancy and unruly behavior while living with his grandparents. He has caught up missing credits, maintained good grades, and gained acceptance into a trade school. Most importantly, the client expresses he is happy and feels pride in his achievements. At this point, the client has not used marijuana in six months, will be able to graduate this year and has a set plan in place to be released from probation when he finishes school.
- From September through March, Child Focus preschool classrooms have been open 88.4% of regularly scheduled days providing critical child care to working families, when many centers were closed.

We appreciate the conversations we have had so far with members of this committee and are encouraged by the support for improving the lives of at-risk families and children.

Your support for this amendment will help improve the lives of 680 additional families and 150 additional at-risk children who need childcare. Through our work we will continue to make a difference in people's lives; provide high quality child care, teach valuable career skills, maintain families, help those struggling with addiction, and provide therapy to those suffering from abuse and trauma. By reaching additional families and children through these funds it could be transformative, leading to greater success in the classroom, a more productive workforce, people staying out of jail, a lower dependence upon government programs, and increased quality of life outcomes.

Chairman Oelslager and members of the committee, we urge your support for this amendment request. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.