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Testimony for the House Finance Subcommittee Health and Human Services
H.B. 110 (Operating Budget)
On Child Custody Relinquishment and Support for Multi-System Youth Funding

March 4, 2021

Chairman Roemer, Ranking Member West, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for allowing me to testify today on H.B. 110. My name is Jerry Freewalt and I am the Director of the Office for Social Concerns of the 23-county Catholic Diocese of Columbus. I am here today in support of funding for Multi-System Youth and as a father advocating for families like mine who faced the gut-wrenching prospect of child custody relinquishment to acquire needed residential treatment for a child.

Two years ago I testified before the subcommittee with other parents of multi-system youth. I shared that my wife and I love our children and consider ourselves a strong Ohio family. But our family bond was tested five years ago due to our daughter's life-threatening behavioral health diagnosis of untreatable major depressive disorder, anxiety, and acute suicidal ideation. She spent 70 days of intensive inpatient psychiatric treatment while the typical stay is 3 to 5 days.

After a couple weeks at the hospital, during our darkest hour, we learned our private insurance stopped coverage of her stay. We also learned that if her condition did not improve, she would need to be transferred to a residential facility most likely in Indiana. Since our private insurance would not pay for residential treatment, we would have to go to court and relinquish custody to Children Services. We're a good family and just wanted what was best for our daughter. To us, relinquishing custody is breaking the sacred bond of the family. Facing untold medical costs, our deliberations were heartbreaking.

Fortunately for us, her condition improved right before we were to go to court. I am happy to say our daughter is fine, a hardworking and loving young adult. But I am fully aware of the many families in Ohio who had to follow through with custody relinquishment. I have heard their heartfelt stories and the challenging journey they endure.

Two years ago I stated, "I think it is a shame for a loving family, who puts family first, to face custody relinquishment to acquire needed residential treatment, in this case behavioral health care. This must end."

During the budget process the subcommittee firmly took this issue to heart and inserted in the language of the bill that "it is the intent of Ohio and the General Assembly that custody relinquishment for the sole purpose of gaining access to child-specific services for multi-system children and youth must cease." And more than just words, the General Assembly endorsed a Multi-System Youth Child Relinquishment Fund and charged the Ohio Family and Children First Council to develop a Multi-System Youth Action Plan. For this I am eternally grateful.

Thanks to the efforts of the champion legislators of the General Assembly, Governor DeWine and his Children's Initiatives staff, the Ohio Family and Children First Council, Ohio Medicaid, the Multisystem Youth Coalition, and others, I truly believe Ohio is taking this issue seriously.

The Multi-System Youth Child Relinquishment Fund has helped hundreds of families in Ohio the last two years. I cannot even imagine how hard it must be today during the COVID-19 pandemic for families who are going through what my family went through. I just can't imagine. This funding is critical and life-saving.

But we all know this funding while absolutely necessary is a band-aid and interim step to what is really needed, a transformational and systemic overhaul of providing care for multi-system youth and their families. The plan to implement OhioRISE holds great promise for families of multi-system youth. I applaud the efforts of Director Maureen Corcoran and the staff at Ohio Medicaid for taking the words of this subcommittee and putting Ohio's commitment into action. The development of OhioRISE will be a challenge, a journey of policy, implementation, and learning. But at its core OhioRISE will help our youth and families rise after they have fallen down into despair. I am grateful Ohio is up for this worthy challenge.

I respectfully ask you to maintain the Multi-System Youth Child Relinquishment Fund as introduced in this budget, to support funding dedicated to multi-system youth across state agencies – Medicaid, Developmental Disabilities, and Jobs and Family Services, and support funding necessary to successfully implement OhioRISE in the Ohio Department of Medicaid budget.

Thank you for standing up for Ohio families, rolling up your sleeves, and working to fix this problem. Most importantly, thank you for the difference in the lives you have touched the last two years. Much work needs to be done in the days to come. This budget can help move us forward in our shared commitment to prevent child custody relinquishment for multi-system youth.