

Warren County Children Services



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February 1, 2022

Opponent Testimony SB216

Senate Judiciary Committee

Susan Walther, Director

Warren County Children Services

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To Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

My name is Susan Walther and I am the Director of Warren County Children Services. I am writing to share our agency's opposition to Senate Bill 216, *Enact Dylan's Law*. Despite good intent, the bill is overreaching and contrary to evidenced-informed interventions like OhioSTART. It directly contradicts current research and best practices in the areas of substance use treatment, prenatal care, and child welfare programs.

Our agency's mission is to assure the safety of children through prevention and a family-centered approach which promotes the wellbeing of the child and family unit. In a time where Family First Prevention Services Act has been enacted by President Trump, it seems counterproductive to require a child to be removed with no contact with the parents. Brain science has shown the first few years of a child's life to be their formative years. Interruption in bonding with parents can create attachment issues; at times rising to the level of Reactive Attachment Disorder. In our experience, children have successfully remained with extended family members who provide safety and supervision so their parents can continue to stay involved with the child throughout the duration of their treatment services. To remove a child from their family of origin and not allow visitation is to the detriment of a child as well as punishment to the parent. Our purpose is to help families increase their level of functioning in order to maintain the family unit and preserve family connections. In Warren County, we implemented the START Program in 2018 and have seen much success in working with families who struggle with ongoing substance abuse issues. START provides increased oversight of the family and is tailored to meet their individual needs. Parents are also matched with a Peer Support Specialist who can give them hope that recovery is possible. We want to empower parents to not only become drug-free but also increase familial bonding and their ability to safely raise their children.

There are other existing programs such as Brigid's Path which treats children experiencing withdrawal symptoms in a safe and family-friendly environment while allowing the parents unlimited, supervised contact. This is primarily utilized when a parent maintains custody. This type of setting would not be supported under SB 216. Another approach Warren County is working on

Website: www.co.warren.oh.us/ChildrenServices

The Mission of Warren County Children Services is to serve families in need and protect children who are abused, neglected or dependent through collaboration with our partners and the support of the community.

involves creating a partnership with our local Health Department, hospitals, and OB/GYN offices to encourage women who test positive for substances prenatally to voluntarily work with our office prior to delivery. The intent is to assist them in getting into treatment early in an effort to reduce prenatal exposure and support them in developing a Plan of Safe Care prior before the baby is born to head off the need for unnecessary child removals.

There are certainly times when a child is removed from their parents due to testing positive for substances at birth. This decision is made after an assessment of safety is completed which involves looking at family risk factors, supports, and history. Just as it cannot be said all children are safe with a parent that is using, it can also not be assumed all children are unsafe; which is the why the federal Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act requires child welfare agencies to ensure each substance-exposed infant has a Plan of Safe Care in place. The requirement to remove for six months does not take these assessments into account and prevents a child welfare agency from working with families to develop appropriate plans that place a child in the least restrictive environment. In Warren County, we have lowered the number of children entering custody while also lowering recurrence of abuse and neglect. I believe this shows we are able to maintain children in their homes and with family while lowering the risk of abuse and neglect. Unnecessarily removing a child from their family makes reunification more difficult and will increase the number of children in foster care at a time when we already have difficulty finding appropriate foster homes.

The addiction crisis is real as is the risk that it creates for vulnerable children. We believe there are alternative and safe options that exist outside of SB 216. Our agency opposes this bill and issues it will create for already successful programs and the breakdown of families. Warren County Children Services stands to assure the safety of children in our community while maintaining the family unit whenever possible and preventing the removal of children. We have successfully worked with families struggling with addiction without the mandate to place every substance-exposed infant into foster care. I urge the committee to oppose SB 216. Please contact me with any additional questions.

Respectfully Submitted,



Susan Walther, Director
Warren County Children Services