

Proponent Testimony – HB14 | *Ohio House Families and Aging Committee*  
**Andrea Johnson** – Cincinnati, OH | 513-504-2424 | andreav2011@gmail.com

Chairwoman Schmidt, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Humphrey, and members of the House Families and Aging Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on HB14. My name is Andrea Johnson from Cincinnati, Ohio. I am a bonus mom to a bright and loving 7-year-old boy whom I gained through marriage to my husband Detrick, and I have a 4 year old biological daughter with my husband. I am here today in support of HB14 because it will make a huge difference in the lives of Ohio kids caught in the middle of parental separation and its aftermath.

HB14 will put fit parents whether married or not on equal footing and incentivize them to work together toward a plan that maximizes shared time and responsibility! When this is unsuccessful, parents will not have the looming threat of being relegated a visiting parent but will receive equitable judicial intervention starting with a rebuttable equal parenting presumption. I specifically want to address the impact this bill will have for children of unmarried parents and children in communities of color.

My husband and I both experienced childhood pain and conflict from the divorce of our parents, but those experiences did not prepare us for realities of the current family court system for unmarried parents, especially black fathers who seek full and active roles in their children's lives. The status quo in Ohio's family courts presents many barriers that do more harm than good for children who are not born from a traditional nuclear family. These barriers greatly contribute to the disparities that children of color face growing up in single parent homes with seemingly absent fathers. In the current system, fathers, especially black fathers, feel that going to court is a losing battle they can't win!

HB14 will help change the historically negative narrative that many in the black community have of the justice system and will be a key factor in changing the structural dynamic for black children in single parent homes in Ohio. No community has been hit harder by dad deprivation than the black community, but prior to 1960, most black families consisted of married mothers and fathers (Farrell, 2020)<sup>1</sup>. Government financial assistance policies to low-income mothers so long as they weren't married or lived with fathers in the home, has contributed to almost a triple increase of unmarried births in the black community (25% to 72%) (Farrell, 2020). Likewise, outdated "every other weekend" parenting standards and inequitable treatment of unmarried fathers in family court further solidified single custodial homes and visiting parent models. Not often do parents, especially lower income black parents, have the financial means for costly legal representation, lengthy court hearing processes, and other legal formalities to risk being relegated to the periphery of their child's life. The well-documented inequities and problems in criminal court are magnified in family courts and many black fathers are afraid to face this bias, leaving their children deprived. Simply put, the system is systemically contributing to fatherlessness and HB14 is a sound solution to improve this issue.

Today, 40% of children across the U.S. are born from unmarried parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019)<sup>2</sup>, a changing trend from the traditional nuclear family and important when examining childhood outcomes, especially for black children. In Ohio, when a child is born from unmarried parents, the mother is automatically sole legal custodian and father has no legal rights to the child. This does not mean that unmarried couples do not collaboratively raise their children or when parent's end their relationship, the father is no longer involved, despite living separately. Yet, society AND family courts often make damaging assumptions about a father's lack of involvement when they live in a separate home.

By passing HB14, more children can experience shared time and involvement with both parents without disparities based on their parent's prior relationship status. These children will be further protected from experiencing poor developmental outcomes related to parental deprivation. Research

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<sup>1</sup> Farrell, Warren (2020, June 20). *If Black Lives Matter, Black Dads Must Matter*. Milwaukee Community Journal. <https://communityjournal.net/if-black-lives-matter-black-dads-must-matter/>

<sup>2</sup> Source: "Living Arrangements of Children 2019" - U.S. Census Bureau 2019

shows that fatherless children are more likely to be damaged in over 50 developmental areas. Dad deprived kids, especially black boys suffer more intensely from emotional disorders, depression, obesity, Alcohol, drugs, imprisonment, and many other factors (Farrell, 2020). According to the US Census Bureau in 2011, over 50% of African American children lived with their custodial parent while their other parent lived outside the household, a rate almost twice as large in proportion to white children (24%) (Grail, 2013)<sup>3</sup>. Outdated standards in family court have clearly contributed to these statistics.

For parents like my husband who go through the process of hiring an attorney, establishing paternity, and petitioning for custody/parenting time to SIMPLY continue their role as an active parent, HB14 will not make the journey unreasonably hard and heart breaking. As a non-custodial parent without joint legal custody my husband sees his son on a school night every 2 weeks and must maintain weekly communication with his son's teacher and school to get copies of homework, report cards, and announcements sent home in backpacks that never make it to our home. My husband has only been able to meet 1 of his school friends and must use 10-minute phone calls between visits to connect with him about his day and provide support.

Equal parenting presumptions will help to reduce blanket perceptions from magistrates about a one's capability to parent simply because they aren't present in the mother's home. De-facto sole legal custody arrangements for unmarried parents in family court will no longer be an unchallenged status quo when shared parenting is appropriate. Children can do homework and solve challenges with mom AND dad during the week and get to experience unique and special qualities of both parents without being deprived for long lengths of time.

To provide a small but meaningful example--last week, our son had an evening event at his school that happened to line up with my husband's parenting time schedule and we were able to take him. He pointed out a kid to my husband, who he said was routinely picking on him. My husband suggested to him that they have a conversation with the student and parent and his eyes immediately lit up and he nodded. Together they went and talked to the kid and parents to clear the air and resolve any conflict. Afterward, he told his dad how appreciative he was and had a smile from ear to ear the rest of the evening. Having his dad physically there in school as a support, protector, and role model made a huge difference in his confidence at school but is a rare experience simply because of the current parenting order.

If Ohio family court laws continue to be influenced by outdated gender roles and parental hierarchies, then we will see little change in outcomes for children in co-parenting homes and growing disparities for children of color. Ohio families and children are ready for HB14, please don't let them down!

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<sup>3</sup> Source: Grail, T., "Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2011. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau (2013)