



**Ohio House of Representatives
House Families and Aging Committee
Substitute House Bill 7
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Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Miller and Ranking Member Denson, and members of the Families and Aging Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share with you today in support of Substitute House Bill 7. My name is Dawn Hall and I am the director of the Head Start Programs at the Athens Meigs Educational Service Center.

Our programs are located in Gallia and Meigs Counties, and are provided in three stand-alone centers and in classrooms at 8 elementary buildings in all County school districts. The Athens-Meigs ESC Head Start is recognized as a community leader and has been the grantee since 2002, providing birth to 5 services to 276 children and their families. Our program is nationally recognized for its work with school district collaborations and I am proud to say our family engagement program is also recognized for its excellence.

Like other Head Start programs, our program goal is to give every vulnerable child an opportunity to succeed. We have been able to see significant gains and positive outcomes by not only supporting children in their development but by providing research-based parenting curriculums and trainings that are individualized to meet the needs of families.

Our programs are offered in a variety of settings based on the needs of community and families. We complete regular community assessments to identify changes in community needs. Upon enrollment, our families complete a Family Needs Assessment that allows us to help families be put on a pathway to success and to develop family goals. I firmly believe that in order to help a child succeed or to have skills needed for school readiness, that we have to meet families where they are and assist them in preparing for that same success, and that means family stability and success, which is good for all of us.

Early Head Start and Head Start programs like ours, ensure that enrolled children have updated physical, dental, vision and hearing screening and any necessary follow-up care. Children and families are provided with all necessary supplies, including diapers and formula. We also have Family Service Workers who provide support for families and help them set and achieve goals. And we welcome all children, including those with disabilities and staff are well trained to support children with IEPs

One change since the pandemic, has been children with higher needs entering our programs. We are seeing more and more children with significant mental health issues, and they are presenting at younger and younger ages. It is taking a toll on our families and our staff. This bill supports early childhood

mental health services and supports. We need the support, training and services as we work to deal with these issues.

Substitute House Bill 7 also includes a critical investment in Early Head Start with a Resiliency Grant Program targeting Appalachia and communities with high infant mortality rates. This pilot will support new or enhanced center based, home based and child care partnership programs targeted based on community needs.

These programs will be for the youngest children and they will all include the wraparound services including mental health supports families' desperately need.

Frankly, the need in the Appalachia communities far exceeds any current resources available to meet them. Each day, our program must waitlist families who have high needs. Families that are dealing with trauma. Families trying to get an education or enter the workforce but cannot afford or even find quality, reliable childcare. A recent data report from the University of Rio Grande in Gallia County Ohio identified childcare as the number one barrier for attending college.

Expanding Early Head Start allows us to serve more at-risk infants, toddlers and families such as those who are homeless, children in foster care and kinship care families. In the past 5 years, our program has seen approximately 39% increase in the number of children served that are homeless, in foster and kinship care as well as those having incarcerated parents.

The lack of investment in Ohio's young children leaves Ohio's young children behind and jeopardizes our future workforce.

As reported in Groundwork Ohio's Early Childhood Data Dashboard, only about half of eligible low-income children ages 0-5 under 200% of the Federal Poverty Level are able to access any state funded child care, preschool or Head Start. And we see the results of that lack of investment, because only 38% of Ohio kindergartners entering the classroom ready to learn, and only 38% of Ohio students proficient in 8th grade math. Our young children need early learning opportunities to ensure they can reach their full potential and a lifetime of success.

I know resources are tight. But you can be sure that your investment in Head Start programs will yield a high return. For each dollar invested in Head Start, research shows an economic gain of \$7-\$10.

That's because Head Start is not just another preschool program. Early Head Start is not just another childcare program. It has been and continues to be the most solid foundation for families needing a pathway out of poverty. It is a multi-generational program, with a focus on building strong families who produce even stronger children. Children who grow to be productive contributors to our society.

I urge you to support Substitute House Bill 7 and support a strong foundation for Ohio children and families. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you have today.

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