



**Ohio House of Representatives
Families and Aging Committee – RE: HB-7**

**Cuyahoga County Office of Early Childhood Testimony
Presented May 9, 2023**

Chairman Schmidt, Ranking Member Denson and members of the Committee, thank you for your time and attention. We are Invest in Children, the public/private partnership within the Cuyahoga County Office of Early Childhood, that focuses on ensuring the well-being of all young children and their families. There are a considerable number of items in HB-7 – the Strong Foundations Act -- that we strongly support and that are of meaningful consequence to our work. Today, we wish to highlight three.

Within HB-7 there are no less than 10 items that will strengthen the Help Me Grow Program. These items set priorities, encourage collaboration, promote evidence-based work, require evaluation and transparency, and appropriate funding towards these goals. It remains to be seen how much of the \$43 million increase in funding originally proposed by the Governor for Help Me Grow, will ultimately be appropriated. But the increases being discussed recognize that Help Me Grow is currently serving only a small fraction of the families who need these crucial services. In 2019, only 17% of the families who needed home visiting services received them – or about 1 in 6. The Help Me Grow program currently serves 5,000 more families than it did then, yet many families still go unserved. While other increases in state funding will help increase the number of families served, HB-7 will work to improve the quality of the services delivered. Invest in Children strongly supports these items.

The second item we'd like to callout for support relates to how the Medicaid program serves families with young children. As the state budget process progresses in the Senate, we are very supportive of the efforts to expand Medicaid coverage to 300% of the FPL for pregnant mothers and children. This would be a substantial statement that pregnant women are recognized as uniquely vulnerable to changes in healthcare access that can happen when they take a job or return to work. A closely related issue in the Strong Foundations Act is how wellness for young children is advanced through continuous enrollment that maintains Medicaid coverage for children 0 to 3 regardless of short-term fluctuations in household income. A young child will always be best served when they have a consistent medical home. Continuous eligibility makes provider consistency and positive health outcomes much more likely. Without continuous eligibility, children are more likely to miss well-child visits or to experience transiency in health care providers, resulting in missed immunizations, missed lead screenings, and missed opportunities to prevent infant deaths due to treatable health conditions and safe sleep education. We strongly support Medicaid continuous eligibility for children 0 to 3.

Lastly, we'd like to call out the HB-7 provisions that address early childhood mental health (ECMH). The mental health needs of Ohio children are not being met. Recent data shows that 1 in 5 children in Ohio are experiencing a mental health condition – yet less than 60 percent receive treatment. For example, an ECMH program funded by Invest in Children has a wait list of more than 125 children, and some will wait up to 6 months before being seen. When your child is having a mental health crisis, 6 months is an eternity to wait for help.

Further illustrating the problem, according to a recent poll conducted by Groundwork Ohio, nearly 7 in 10 Ohio parents with children under the age of 5 said that they were worried about the mental or emotional health of their children. ECMH consultation provides early childhood educators with specialized professional development and ensures they are prepared to care for children requiring significant levels of extra support – including many who have a history of trauma and abuse. Recent referral trends include increased aggression towards other kids, self-harming behaviors, and suspected or diagnosed autism.

The outcome of the state budget process regarding ECMH services remains uncertain. We see HB-7 as contributing to the quality and accessibility of services offered, which are items that can and should advance concurrently with larger capacity related appropriations. We strongly support HB-7's ECMH provisions that support consulting, coaching, training, and mental health supports for childcare assistant teachers and lead teachers, and for the development of training tools, service and referral supports, and program evaluation, and we encourage you to maintain them.

Thank you for your time and attention.

FOLLOW UP CONTACT INFORMATION

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