

House Behavioral Health Committee
Proponent testimony HB512
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Dr. Kellijo Jeffries
Director – Portage County Job and Family Services
Kellijo.jeffries@jfs.ohio.gov
330-297-2226

Chair Schmidt, Vice-Chair Miller, Ranking Member Denson, and members of the House Families and Aging Committee, thank you for your consideration of this proponent testimony on HB 512.

My name is Dr. Kellijo Jeffries and I am the director at Portage County Job and Family Services and I have worked in the Job and Family Services system for thirty years. I have served as the director in Portage County for the last 9 years. I have been fortunate in my tenure to have the support of Representative Gail Pavliga who authentically wanted to understand our challenges in child welfare and has taken bold steps to try to assist in this space by introducing this bill.

As a director I am entrusted as the guardian of children who have been abused, neglected and who have endured trauma throughout their lives. As a director I am entrusted as the guardian of children where families are unable to maintain their children in their homes due to multi system needs. As a director with a heart for children, I desire to coordinate the best care, support, and services for these precious children. I routinely interface with systems unable to meet the best interest needs of children due to closed systems, system silos, and workforce challenges. Myself and my colleagues in child welfare endure with children who have experienced horrific trauma, and present with the highest needs such as desire to harm self, taking actions to harm self and others, and struggling with regulation in their daily living. These Ohio children are the children we struggle to secure immediate crisis placement for. These Ohio children who are entrusted in the care of child welfare, far too often are sleeping in government buildings, are left in placements that do not offer the right level of care or sit in emergency rooms for days and weeks on end, while we seek to find or create capacity in Ohio.

I am a director in a child welfare system that understands that based on my education and training, myself and my team should have the resources and supports available to meet what is in the best interest for children. I am a social worker that understands the concept of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; with the base level being food, clothing, and shelter. The second level is safety and security. For our children with the most intense needs, we lack the infrastructure to meet the most baseline need of shelter for Ohio's children that present with the greatest needs. How can these children move up in the pyramid without the right infrastructure?

While the new Department of Children and Youth (DCY) under the leadership of Director Kara Wentz, has convened a Placement Crisis Workgroup with members of many "systems" around this profound issue that has been a reality in child welfare for many years, HB512 can set the stage for a new beginning where Ohioans put all children first. This bill would address the conflicting rule requirements between the departments of job and family services (now, children and youth), mental health and addiction services, and developmental disabilities which often prevent providers from serving youth with multi-system (mental health and developmental/intellectual) needs. The new rule supports a no wrong door concept where system licensure can be streamlined as we move forward in creating emergency placement facilities for children; a strategy identified in DCY's Placement Crisis Workgroup. Additionally, HB512 encourages the ongoing collaboration of the Ohio Family and Children First Cabinet Council agencies, associations, and local partners to continue finding solutions to this profound placement crisis issue in Ohio.

"Every child you encounter is a divine appointment." - Wess Stafford

Every child entrusted in my care is a divine appointment for me to advocate for placement, support and services, that will help to stabilize children and to move them to a phase of safety and security, where they can dream and realize their greatest potential. My ask of this General Assembly is to make every child in Ohio your divine appointment as well.

Thank you for your servant leadership in Ohio.