

I'm Pam Green, the president and CEO of Easterseals Redwood serving greater Cincinnati and northern KY. The 450 employees at our affiliate serve more 7,000 families each year, including people with disabilities, veterans and people who are economically disadvantaged.

I want to personally thank our southwest Ohio Representatives Cindy Abrams and Rachel Baker and Chairwoman Schmidt for bringing forward HB 676 which will so positively impact children and families with disabilities.

I am a proud resident of Cincinnati, and I am also proud to have grown up across Ohio's southern border in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. For people like me, one of the things you grow up knowing to be FACT is that Ohio has a stronger safety net than KY, and that Ohio better provides for the children who are its most vulnerable citizens.

So when Easterseals serving Greater Cincinnati merged with Redwood of Northern KY in 2022, I was shocked to learn that there was one area where we weren't doing better in Ohio.

In Kentucky and more than a dozen other states, families of children with complex medical needs have access to licensed medical childcare through Prescribed Pediatric Extended Care, PPEC, a Medicaid-funded service that pays for skilled nursing and therapeutic supports in an early education setting.

I want you to imagine for just a moment that you have a child born with a disability that requires continual medical or technological intervention.

You use up all of your FMLA while they are in the NICU, and maybe your spouse does as well. Then your child is released from the hospital...and you have nowhere to go. Childcare centers aren't set up with nursing staff, and even if you can afford private nursing—which few can--you can't afford it around the clock. If you qualify for a Home Care waiver, congratulations--and good luck finding a home nurse in this job market, or one who is willing to take on a child whose health conditions brings considerable risk.

That's the challenge faced every day by thousands of Ohio families. But it doesn't have to be like that.

Across the river at Easterseals Redwood's medical childcare and five-star early childhood education site, families can enroll their children with complex medical needs in a childcare center supported by a team of nurses and therapists. Their children are learning and hitting milestones alongside typically developing peers. Parents can continue to work knowing

their child is safe and cared for. The frequency of hospitalizations goes down, and costs of unnecessary hospitalizations are reduced.

We at Easterseals Redwood are determined that what side of the river families of kids with disabilities live on doesn't determine what services they have access to. And it matters: as we seek to grow the great state of Ohio, I have two board members who moved from Cincinnati to northern KY because their children with complex medical needs didn't have access to medical childcare in Ohio.

We have so many Ohio families on the waitlist for waivers that need PPEC. Their child's medical needs require nursing supervision for daily care, so childcares and preschools can't serve them. But they aren't medically fragile enough to qualify for a Home Care waiver that funds private duty nursing. So they wait, hoping a DD waiver slot opens. Meanwhile the family struggles with lost income and high medical bills, and the child, isolated by their medical complexity, misses those crucial early childhood education classroom moments.

You've heard from Reps. Baker and Abrams about the economic benefits of implementing this program: the cost for PPEC averages around \$300 per day per child. One night in the NICU at Childrens costs about \$5,700. In 2022, CCHMC estimates the cost of avoidable hospital days was \$22.5 million.

Today, you are going to hear from families we serve, as well as families who desperately want their children to have access to services like those we offer.

You will hear a consistent theme: they want to work and they want to feel confident their child is safe. They want their children to experience the joys of play and friendship, to benefit from being included with typically developing kids.

We have a solution that is that special unicorn legislators seek, one that strengthens families and saves taxpayers money.

I want to close by sharing the story of one of our families, the Studers, who Chairwoman Schmidt and Rep Baker were able to meet earlier this year at Easterseals' Ohio Advocacy Day. Boone's dad, Ben, works in logistics and his company has a PTO blackout in November and December, so he couldn't be here and asked me to share his family's story. Ben and Kelsey's son Boone was born with a rare connective tissue disorder called Epidermolysis Bullosa. His skin is extremely fragile and any bump or friction causes his skin to blister or sheer off. He also gets blisters inside of his mouth, on his tongue, in his throat, esophagus, and GI tract. Boone lives his life wrapped in bandages from the neck down.

The Studers were told that Boone would require long term care at home and his life expectancy would depend on how fast the severity of his condition progressed. Ben said, “I hope you can understand the level of sadness and disappointment we felt as parents after hearing that the very first problem our son experienced in life, we couldn’t fix.”

6 months after Boone was born, Boone’s mom was out of FMLA, PTO and every other employer benefit. She was forced to resign from her position. The Studers struggled to get by on Ben’s sole income that hardly allowed them to keep a roof over their heads, let alone foot the bill for the assistance Boone so desperately needed. They learned, and I can attest, that the PPEC eligibility process isn’t an easy one. Ben was told that if he drastically cut his hours or quit his job, Medicaid approval would be a lot easier.

Just think about that for a moment. You want childcare so you can work and provide for your family, but you’re told you can only get childcare if you don’t work.

Fortunately, they were finally approved for PPEC and today, Boone isn’t just walking; he’s running, jumping and climbing.

Boone isn’t just talking; he’s yelling, laughing and singing.

Boone isn’t just eating normal food he is DEMANDING to eat normal food.

All the while doing this safely and comfortably, with managed pain and medications and nursing staff on hand.

Boone still experiences extreme amounts of pain and faces difficult challenges we can’t imagine. But he’s hitting all the early milestones he was told he likely wouldn’t accomplish. Boone is thriving, and his dad says that being in a room with children that are typically developing has benefited Boone as much as any therapy he has received. He sees what activities other kids are doing and finds a way to do these things himself, despite the limitations caused by his condition.

Ben asked me to share that it is imperative that families in Ohio have access to PPEC centers, where children who have been told they can’t or won’t their entire lives are taught ways that they can and will. Where parents that have been told ‘you don’t qualify’ are asked ‘how can we help?’. Ben’s closing plea was to not make life any harder for children that already face an uphill battle. I quote, “parents shouldn’t be forced to decide between getting the medical assistance their children need or bringing home a paycheck to provide for their family. That’s not the American Dream.

I think Ben said it better than I ever could. I ask that you please support HB 676, and I’m happy to answer any questions.