



**House Finance Committee  
HB 7 - Proponent Testimony  
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Good morning, Chairman Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on House Bill 7, the Strong Foundations Act on behalf of the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio.

CDF-Ohio is a statewide non-profit organization which serves as an independent voice for all children. Born out of the civil rights movement, with more than four decades of advocacy in Ohio, it is the mission of the Children's Defense Fund to champion policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect, and ensure their access to appropriate and targeted health care, quality education, and nutritional wellness.

Maternal and infant mortality continues to be a leading public health crisis in Ohio. In 2022, the infant mortality rate in the United States was 5.4 deaths per 1,000 live births. ([2022 March Of Dimes Report Card For Ohio | PeriStats | March of Dimes](#)). According to the March of Dimes, the 2022 infant mortality rate in Ohio was 6.5 per 1,000 live births. The rate among Black infants was 13.6. The infant mortality rate in Appalachia Ohio was **21 percent higher** than in the nation. ([Key Findings: Health Disparities in Appalachian Ohio \(PDF: 320 KB\) \(arc.gov\)](#))

In 2020, Ohio had 14 counties, mostly concentrated in the Appalachian region that are designated as Maternity Care Deserts, and 4 counties with low access to maternity care. A maternity care desert is a **county that lacks a hospital offering obstetric services or a birthing center**, providing no access to an ob-gyn or a certified nurse midwife. ([Maternity Care Deserts Report | March of Dimes](#))



Unfortunately, nationwide, Ohio had the most women impacted by overall reductions in access to care (over 97,000).

This is why we are very excited to testify as a proponent on this comprehensive piece of legislation that addresses many critical needs of pregnant women and children in Ohio. The components of this bill can move the needle on maternal and infant health in Ohio. CDF-Ohio supports all the following investments in infant and maternal health.

### **Early Head Start**

Growing Ohio's Early Head Start program will allow more infants and toddlers in urban, rural, and Appalachian areas of the state to participate in programming including wrap around services and mental health supports that will help families overcome barriers and maintain stability. This will allow more parents to work and support their families knowing their youngest most vulnerable children are taken care of.

### **Help Me Grow Program**

Ohio's Evidence-based home visiting programs is one proven approach to mitigate infant mortality. For every \$1 invested in home visiting programs, the state return on investment is \$6. Help Me Grow is a system of supports for pregnant women, caregivers with new babies, and families with young children with developmental delays and disabilities. These services are usually provided in the home and empower parents with skills, tools, and confidence to ensure the healthy growth of their children.

- 1. Pregnant women who participated in Home Visiting were 48 percent less likely to have a child with low birth weight. ([Help Me Grow](#))**
- 2. More than 95 percent of Ohio parents who accessed Early Intervention for their child reported they were better able to support their child in learning new things and gaining new skills.**



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### **Healthy Beginnings at Home**

Healthy Beginnings at Home (HBAH) is a program designed to reduce infant mortality by providing safe and stable housing to pregnant women and young children. This program, currently operating in Franklin and Summit counties, demonstrates that stable housing improves birth outcomes for at-risk women and their families, reduces Medicaid spending, and addresses racial disparities. The additional funding in HB 7 will allow the program to scale up, offering this critical service to more women and potentially draw down federal money.

### **Nutrition**

We strongly support the provisions of HB 7 that help to enhance the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, WIC. Currently, we know there are women and children who are eligible for, but not participating in, WIC due to barriers they may face accessing the program and barriers in reaching their WIC clinic to have benefits reloaded. We fully support efforts to allow for adjunctive eligibility, allow for automatic benefit reloading, and creating an integrated eligibility determination application for both WIC and SNAP. WIC is an effective program in helping pregnant women, women, and children thrive.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on HB7 and give voice to the concerns of mothers and babies around Ohio. The legislation you favorably pass out of this committee is a mirror by which we see what we value in our state. With HB7, Ohio has the opportunity to make positive strides forward in maternal and infant health. CDF-Ohio urges you to make healthy moms and babies a priority in this state.

I'm happy to answer any question the committee may have.