

The Ohio House

Finance Subcommittee on Public Safety
Representative Kevin Miller, Chair

HOUSE BILL 33
TESTIMONY

Harcum House: Cody Tatum
March 22, 2023

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Miller and Members of the Ohio House Finance Subcommittee on Public Safety, thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony asking you to consider increasing funding in House Bill 33 to fund the Ohio's Children's Advocacy Centers through the Office of Criminal Justice Services in the Department of Public Safety.

My name is Cody Tatum, and I am the director of Harcum House Child Advocacy Center in Fairfield County and Vice-Chairman of the board of the Ohio Network of Child Advocacy Centers. Harcum House is located in Lancaster City Fairfield County and we serve more than 490 children annually. Our center is the Fairfield County multi-disciplinary team responding to child abuse allegations, and includes the Lancaster Police Department, Fairfield County Children Services, Fairfield County Prosecutor's Office, and Fairfield County Sheriff's Department.

Ohio is home to almost 40 accredited and developing centers across the state and Ohio's CACs served nearly 8,000 abused children last year in partnership with local law enforcement departments, prosecutors, and children's services agencies.

Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) are accredited collaborative sites for a comprehensive, multidisciplinary response to child abuse cases. CAC's are designed to reduce the effects of trauma experienced by abused children and adolescents by providing trauma-informed assessment and counseling; facilitating of multi-disciplinary investigative teams; conducting child-sensitive forensic interviews, and providing consistent victim advocacy.

This multi-disciplinary team (MDT) response is the backbone of the CAC.

Not only are CAC's best practice to help kids heal by getting them access to the services they need now and well into the future. But CAC's are also effective and efficient. CACs collaborative investigations can save as much as 36% over the cost of traditional investigations. In addition, the research shows that the use of the CAC multidisciplinary teams has resulted in increased successful prosecutions of child abuse perpetrators, and defendants convicted of sex crimes against children were sentenced to longer prison terms when they had been investigated via the CAC-multidisciplinary model. All 50 states, including Ohio have passed legislation requiring government agencies to collaborate on cases of child abuse and CACs are the key component to ensuring ongoing and effective collaboration.

Here in Ohio, the Children's Advocacy Centers like Harcum House have not received any state funding and have mostly relied on funding through the federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funds and local fundraising to operate. However, during the past three years Harcum House along with other CACs throughout the state have seen devastating cuts to these critical funds. Harcum House alone has seen over 70% in cuts. These VOCA funds are not expected to increase significantly over the next five years and so CAC's in Ohio are struggling.

For Harcum House, this loss caused a 50% loss in staffing while facing unprecedented increases in the number of child abuse cases and the severity of these cases.

For the prior decade, Harcum House annually averaged 260 child victims of abuse. 2021 saw that need increase by 57 percent. In 2022 cases rose another ten percent; and we are on pace to have similar increases in 2023 at Harcum House alone. My colleagues at centers across Ohio are seeing similar increases.

That is why I am here asking that you consider supporting an amendment to fund Child Advocacy Centers in House Bill 33 so that all Ohio kids have access to the best care and support, when the unthinkable happens.

These funds will help cover ongoing expenses necessary to support annually the children served; it will enable us to provide training and support to communities and regions trying to form multidisciplinary teams; and allow us to expand this model to those areas in Ohio that do not have access.

Child Advocacy Centers (CACs) are critical for our kids and we hope we can count on your support.

Thank you, Chair, Ranking Member, and members of the House Finance subcommittee, for this opportunity to share my view on this important legislation. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.