



Senate Finance Committee

Testimony on HB33

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Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and distinguished members of the Finance Committee. It is an honor to share testimony with you regarding HB33. I am the Director of the Jackson County Department of Job and Family Services (JCDJFS) which is in southeastern Ohio. I have been the Director there for nine years and have more than twenty-eight (28) years of service in the field of Health and Human Services at both the state and local level.

Immediately after becoming Director in 2013, I learned that our local child protection system was on the verge of what business would refer to as bankruptcy. Of course, we all recognize that insolvency is not an option for county government; however, it is a harsh reality. Since 2013, the number of kids in care in Jackson County has increased by about 400%. During that year, foster care placement costs were just under \$500,000; last year, these expenses reached an all-time high of just over \$2.2 million. These increasing costs are a fiscal concern that cannot be sustained and is certainly not exclusive to just the Appalachian communities. This is a mammoth challenge for small, medium, large and metro counties across Ohio.

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Medicaid, Food & Ohio Works First Cash Assistance	1.844.640.6446
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Child Support Enforcement Agency	740.286.4181, Option 3
Workforce Development (OhioMeansJobs)	740.688.4201

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Over the last several years, while caseloads have been quadrupling, staff caseworkers have been met by innumerable challenges. One of those being the time that staff are spending on the road. On average our 9 caseworkers travel around 12,000 miles per month to visit youth in care. Of course, when staff are required to spend more time traveling, they have even less time to spend on paperwork requirements and data entry mandates.

When children enter foster care, particularly adolescents and multi-system youth, they frequently require a placement in a residential treatment facility. Often, this is because very few resource families are available to care for this population. And while frustrated, caseworkers are no longer astonished by this ongoing placement crisis, they are however faced with the arduous task of reaching out to fifty or more providers to secure a practical placement for children. These types of searches typically require the efforts of multiple staff for hours to days on end. And, when I reflect upon the challenges that our caseworkers have experienced just within the last year, I am reminded of the trauma that children experienced while we temporarily moved them into our Agency. – Not a licensed foster home, not a facility where there are experienced mental and behavioral health professionals or doctors and nurses are working, but a meeting room in an office where there are workflows and white boards adorning the walls.

As recently as Easter, our entire casework staff spent the weekend rotating in and out of the office, setting up cots, making Easter baskets and ordering breakfast, lunch and dinner delivery for a sibling group of young children. I wish that I could say this is an isolated experience, but it is not. It is happening too often and is, quite frankly, completely inappropriate for children. Over the last few years, I have heard of similar situations from colleagues as they share how their organizations have been forced to set up makeshift accommodations for youth. – These situations exemplify a lack of resources across all systems. Caseworkers, who are responsible for working with families and children to connect them with resources and assist them with overcoming barriers, are not trained as psychiatric nurses, detention officers, or even as mental health professionals. They are not skilled in safe holds or restraints, that is not the work that they are responsible for each day. Within just the last year a variety of MSY youth have been placed into our care, one in particular comes to mind. This youth, a known offender, remained at the Agency into the late hours of the night while law enforcement

installed an ankle monitor and caseworkers vigorously searched for a placement. Throughout that entire night, I worried and staff were cautiously wondering if they would be capable of ensuring security and protecting themselves throughout the night.

The trauma generated by these circumstances extends beyond caseworkers, as it has become a detriment impacting the mental and emotional well-being of many children in care. These children, many of whom in the last year have either slept overnight at a county agency or have remained there until the early hours of the morning, are profoundly impacted. Children share comments like, “well, no one wants me.” It is heartbreaking. While these children wait in a makeshift bedroom, they are frightened, tired, and confused while anxiously trying to sleep on a tiny cot in the corner of a meeting room with complete strangers. These terrified children are from families that are struggling to cope with homelessness, poverty, addiction, mental illness, behavioral health challenges, juvenile delinquency, developmental disabilities, and physical health problems that require more... more staff time, more intensive services, more crisis supports, more trauma-informed care. And more financial support is needed to ensure that all those things can happen.

The challenges that I have mentioned are simply a few of the factors that have led to the workforce crisis in child protection. Frustrated, saddened, exhausted, and traumatized by the extraordinary complexities involved with their caseloads, many caseworkers have simply elected to resign from the field.

Of course, counties were struggling with staff recruitment and retention before the “Great Resignation” due to case complexities, overtime, on-call requirements, and the lack of local resources. Over a period of just three years, our team filled the same four positions four times each. Please keep in mind, it takes approximately two (2) years to sufficiently train and develop the strong critical-thinking skills needed of a caseworker.

Please know that we are tremendously grateful for the financial appropriations in this budget. However, I must share some concerns about policy language contained in HB 33. The current SFY22-23 budget contained numerous new policy provisions for children services that were developed as

a result of the Governor's Children Services Transformation efforts, which garnered significant stakeholder input, including those from county agencies. Implementing those bold and multi-faceted policy changes over the last two years has been a heavy lift, especially considering the workforce and placement challenges. It is important to call out that those changes were by and large, new policies that were vetted and reflected broad community engagement.

Policy language in this budget, on the other hand, has not been vetted with county agencies, even though we are the service delivery teams that engage directly with the families and children that we serve. Language relating to expungement, background checks, and other matters do not even reflect the department's expressed intent. If this and other language becomes law, it will have several troubling and unintended consequences for county agencies and for the communities we serve. We ask that you support removing or amending such language so that Ohio's expungement policy and future background checks for public and private agencies can be vetted widely with stakeholders, such as the public children services agencies.

Members of this Committee, I am requesting your full support and ask that you invest in children and Ohio's future. In particular, I encourage you to call for an end to children sleeping in public agencies and come together to address the placement crisis that is traumatizing our children and our workforce. Children deserve a pathway that allows us to lead them over and through barriers that prevent incarceration, generational barriers, homelessness, and a myriad of other struggles that I already mentioned today. Please restore the original investments outlined in the executive budget and align language that will ensure that these investments, especially the State Child Protection Allocation, continue to be protected in the future. Children deserve your commitment; I ask that you please ensure their safety and well-being by addressing these challenges. Thank you.