



OHIO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

HB 7 – To Extend Categorical Eligibility for Publicly Funded Child Care to Foster and Kinship Care

Representative Andrea White

Representative Sharon Ray

Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee, thank you for allowing us to testify on House Bill 7 – legislation that will help increase the number of stable, safe family foster homes and long-term kinship care options by providing publicly funded child care for children in the foster care system in these placements.

As this committee has often heard, Ohio’s workforce and child care crises continue to loom large. Today parents seeking to enter or remain in the workforce are struggling to access affordable, safe, quality child care and early learning for their children, while at the same time employers are wrestling with finding qualified workers to meet their business and customer needs.

On top of that, you’ve heard about the foster care crisis across Ohio where the shortage of foster families, group homes, residential treatment facilities and other placements are overwhelming child welfare agencies. For years, Ohio’s child protection system has struggled with a rising number of

children coming into care, due in part to the opioid epidemic and other substance abuse and mental health issues. Youth in custody are frequently housed in offices and emergency rooms and other temporary places for days, weeks and even longer, particularly children with the deepest needs. For example, 503 children in foster care spent at least one night in county government offices across our counties in the fiscal year ending June 2022. On top of that, many children are frequently moved from home to home multiple times over the span of their childhoods – adding even more instability and crisis to their formative years.

Stabilizing our most traumatized children in the safest, most nurturing settings possible should be one of our top priorities as a state. So how can we do better? A while back, I met with Ohio Job and Family Services Director Matt Damschroder and asked him what does he think from his vantage point of serving as a former foster parent with his wife and previously overseeing the state's child welfare system under ODJFS. What he said to me that day and what I have heard subsequently from other state leaders and professionals in the children's services arena is what led to the creation of this bill. And that is this sobering yet highly correctable truth: The number one barrier potential foster families and kinship caregivers most frequently cite for being unable to take a child into their homes is the tremendous financial burdens of child care.

That's why today we are here to talk about HB 7 – a bill that will provide a huge stabilizing factor for many children by helping connect them to families who are very willing and interested in taking care of them, but simply can't afford to say yes. HB 7 will provide categorical eligibility for publicly funded child care for Ohio's children who are cared for by foster parents and long-term kinship caregivers.

We currently do not have a breakdown by poverty level of the children in custody of our children's services organizations, but it is an accurate statement to say that a disproportionate number of kids in care are low income. The availability of publicly funded childcare in Ohio is currently based on **income** (of where the child resides) and **not need**. Therefore, a child may be living at home and in a PFCC setting. But once that child is removed due to abuse or neglect, the eligibility for PFCC shifts to the income of the new household. Few families are in the financial position to suddenly take on the cost childcare (which can easily exceed \$1000 per month, per child, depending on age). This negatively impacts the availability of foster families and kinship placements. Additionally, it adversely impacts the child in many ways, including the loss of a familiar placement settings due to lack of childcare. It also may result in a child already receiving publicly funded childcare and in a childcare setting being removed from the childcare facility (in addition to losing his or her home), and further disrupting the child's life.

The cost of childcare is prohibitive for not just existing foster care and kinship families, but also a deterrent to recruiting new families. When a kinship and or foster family cannot be secured, children often end up in congregate care settings which are far more expensive and not as nurturing as a home setting. Currently, Ohio has almost 900 children living in group home settings, rather than foster homes. I'd like to turn it over to my joint sponsor Representative Sharon Ray who will share additional details in support of HB 7.

Representative Ray:

Creating a more compassionate and child-centered system for our children means access to more safe, caring family homes. Removing child care barriers for foster and kinship families means we will open more doors for our children in protective custody. In Ohio, approximately 14,300 children are being cared for away from their parents in foster care. About 4,000 of those children are placed with a relative or family friend in kinship care and roughly 8,000 of them are living with foster parents. An additional 2,000 children live in congregate care, including about 900 in group homes with the rest in residential facilities.

Foster and kinship caregivers are critical partners in ensuring every Ohio child grows up in a safe and loving home. I believe we have a responsibility to support those who are caring for our most vulnerable children. House Bill 7 will

support foster and kinship caregivers by providing publicly funded childcare for the time they are at work or a program of education –allowing caregivers to focus on providing for their families while ensuring their children are taken care of.

Currently, the average cost of center-based child care for Ohio families ranges from \$9,580 to \$12,351 per year or more – depending on the age of the child, with amounts being much higher than that in some of our cities. For example, a working foster mom with two young children – an infant and a preschooler – would spend almost \$10 an hour on child care alone. With childcare cost averaging at minimum from \$700 to over \$1000 per month and foster care stipends running roughly \$400 to \$1,200 per month to pay for everything else– you can see why the child care piece becomes so important to recruiting and keeping foster and kinship caregivers.

Across the board we have a need for more foster families, whether very young children or teens. Let's take the objections off the table by removing the things that get in the way for current and potential foster and kinship parents so that more loving, caring families can say yes to our children. Let's pass HB 7 to provide more homes with stability and support to help our most vulnerable children move forward.

Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee thank you again for allowing us to testify on House Bill 7. We are happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.