



House Children and Human Services Committee
February 26 2025
Proponent Testimony: HB 96

House Bill 96 Testimony: The Buckeye Ranch

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 96. My name is Vickie Thompson-Sandy, and I serve as the CEO of The Buckeye Ranch, a leading provider of child welfare and behavioral health services in Ohio and a member of the Ohio Children's Alliance.

For over 60 years, The Buckeye Ranch has served Ohio's most vulnerable children and families through community and school based mental health care, treatment foster care, residential mental health treatment, including the new psychiatric residential programming, crisis intervention, and prevention services. As an OhioRISE Care Management Entity (CME), we also help families navigate complex behavioral health needs to prevent out-of-home placements.

The Role of Private Agencies in Child Welfare & Behavioral Health

Ohio is one of **only nine states** with a **county-run child welfare system**, meaning each of Ohio's **88 counties** sets **its own policies, rates, and provider requirements**. While counties **hold legal custody** of children in foster care, they rely on **private agencies like The Buckeye Ranch** to:

- **Recruit, train, and license foster families**
- **Provide behavioral health treatment and crisis intervention**
- **Operate residential programs for youth with high needs**
- **Deliver case management and family support services**

In addition to this, some counties contract out other services to their private agency counterparts. In **Franklin County**, The Buckeye Ranch plays a unique role through the **Permanent Family Solutions Network (PFSN)**, where we **directly provide child protection casework and maintain custodial relationships** for **Franklin County Children Services (FCCS)**. This **public-private partnership** ensures families get the **best possible care**, but **rising placement costs threaten our sustainability of this programming, coupled with a shrinking workforce**.

The **state budget must sustain critical investments** to **prevent placement shortages, longer wait times, and additional strain on families** while ensuring **sound policy changes** that strengthen, rather than destabilize, Ohio's child welfare system.



Key Budget Priorities

1. Protect Medicaid Reimbursement Rates for Behavioral Health

The behavioral health workforce crisis is worsening, with 40% turnover annually and residential providers operating at only 50-75% capacity due to staffing shortages. To maintain access to OhioRISE and Multi-System Youth (MSY) services, we must:

- Maintain **current Medicaid rates** to avoid service cuts
- **Build on** previous Medicaid rate increases with **an additional 5%** investment
- Ensure **community-based mental health providers** can retain staff and meet demand

2. Preserve Student Wellness and Success Funds (SWSF)

Schools are a primary access point for children's mental health services. Without SWSF funding:

- School-based therapy, crisis intervention, and trauma-informed care could be at risk at a time of increased youth mental health needs
- Behavioral health providers will struggle to maintain partnerships with their local schools
- Suspension and expulsion rates, which were a reason the SWSF fund was created could rise again, threatening long-term success for our students.

We urge the **legislature to protect Student Wellness and Success funding** from being impacted by **school funding formula changes**.

3. Support House Bill 7 – Publicly Funded Child Care for Foster Families

A major barrier to foster parent recruitment is access to child care. HB 7 would:

- Allow foster parents to attend training and court hearings without financial strain
- Make fostering more accessible to working parents by expanding publicly funded childcare for foster families. Without adequate foster family care, county children services are forced to look for alternative placement options like costly group home and residential care. This level of care should be reserved for the youth who most need that level of care.

Investing in HB 7 by incorporating it into the budget bill would be critical in helping us recruit and retain foster parents, keeping children out of higher-intensity placements like residential treatment.



Concerns & Recommended Solutions

1. Foster Care Rate Cards

HB 96 grants DCY authority to standardize placement rates, but fails to address the real cost drivers:

- Regional cost variations and service differences
- County-imposed regulatory compliance costs. One county requires us to conduct finger printing for every employee annually at \$50 per check. That costs us approximately \$10,000 annually for one county's requirement.
- The specialized needs of programs like Safe Harbor's human trafficking residential program

Instead of a one-size-fits-all rate card, we propose **a legislative-led workgroup** to:

- **Review IV-E cost reports and analyze cost drivers**
 - **Ensure provider rates are fair and sustainable**
 - **Develop data-driven solutions that stabilize the system**
 - **Provide a report with recommendations to the state legislature**
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2. Licensure Suspension

HB 96 allows residential facilities and foster homes to be shut down based on a wide variety of criteria, including allegations which could sometimes take months to be investigated by counties and then proven to not be substantiated. This could:

- Disrupt children's placements, increasing trauma and exacerbating Ohio's placement crisis which we have \$30M allocated to Regional Child Wellness Campuses to help resolve.
- Deter families from fostering due to fear of immediate suspension
- Discourage providers from remaining in the system and shrink placement options at a time where it is critical that we increase the amount of options.

We urge the legislature to both narrow the scope of this language to mitigate unintended consequences and create due process for agencies to alleviate the adverse action.

3. Regional Child Wellness Campuses

HB 96 allocates \$30 million for new Regional Child Wellness Campuses, an investment which we believe could be transformational in combatting Ohio's ongoing placement crisis. We deeply appreciate this commitment to expanding resources for children in need and want to ensure that the state's investment is maximized. There are some restrictions which we fear could hinder the impact of these dollars, including:



- That these campuses could only serve PCSA-custody youth, excluding youth placed through OhioRISE and MSY funding
- There is not a mechanism for ongoing funding for this program
- It would stand to compete for already-limited workforce resources without addressing the root causes of placement shortages

For these reasons, we recommend expanding the eligible uses of this funding to include treatment foster care initiatives to 1. increase the number of specialized foster homes for youth with complex needs and 2. expand our child welfare workforce.

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 96. I am happy to respond to any questions you may have.

Thank you,

Vickie Thompson-Sandy
President & CEO
The Buckeye Ranch