

Proponent Testimony for House Bill 96
House Children and Human Services Committee
Jovonna Williams, RN, Every Child Succeeds
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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 today in support of the Governor's proposal for the expansion of home visitation services in Ohio.

My name is Jovonna Williams, I am a registered nurse, who works as a home visitor. Before I earned my degree as a nurse, I was a new mom with a high school diploma who wanted to better support myself and my child. I didn't have a lot of family support to ask questions or opinions of, so I submitted a self-referral to Every Child Succeeds, a program with Help Me Grow home visiting. During my prenatal stage up until my child and I graduated the program in 2021 we met with our family support specialist. I truly credit a lot of my success today to her support and knowledge.

I learned a lot of different things about how my body and my mind change during pregnancy and after having the baby, even things like brushing your teeth with hot water could cause potential exposure to lead while pregnant, and a vast number of other things I didn't know and would have never guessed. She involved me with my community and was always able to provide resources for whatever I may have needed at the time.

I was navigating motherhood, but I didn't have to wing it like a lot of mothers usually do like I thought I would have to. It was a relief to have someone who was a support for me, not just interested in coming to see a fresh new baby. My home visitor specialist was involved in the development of my child, and the betterment of my mental health. She encouraged and supported my goal-setting and really held me accountable for the things I set out to do. The program also held quarterly gatherings to allow the active families in the program to meet and really feel that love and support from the village we created. That may have been one of the best parts!

Through Every Child Succeeds, I received assistance with diapers wipes, and books. I also received so many tools for myself -budgeting tools, smart goal-setting templates, grants, and scholarship information. We had quite a few activities and Montessori-style toys to develop my child's gross and fine motor skills allowing her to learn through play.

Covid happened, shutting down the home visiting, but my visitor didn't miss a beat. Our sessions moved onto Zoom, books, and supplies were dropped off on my porch while me and my little one waved from the window. The resources my home visitor provided extended to community help and assistance from places I never knew were in my community. Even with a lot of daycares closing, and my child not being able to go out into the world to learn, she still thrived, learned, and reached her milestone, thanks to the support from my home visitor. We were able to stay afloat thanks to the resources from my home visitor.

Children are sponges, with brains that grow fast from birth to 3 years old. It is crucial to have programs that provide support for mothers and babies during that time. A mother who is operating at her best, physically and mentally, will allow their child to thrive in that short amount of time, where over one million neural pathways are being created each second. Cognitive, social, and emotional growth is rapidly occurring in this critical period all the way to the age of 3 years of age.

My daughter is now in kindergarten, thriving with reading, spelling, and addition and subtraction. When starting kindergarten, her teacher inquired if she had been in school before kindergarten. Out of 26 letters she recognized and could name the sounds for 23 of them. She scored over the threshold for her math iReady testing. All of this started at home, with our home visitor encouraging and supporting us.

Research from the economist James Heckman insists that quality early childhood programs that begin at birth can deliver a 13 percent per year return on investment. This can be seen through more years of education, more employment, and better adult health. It is imperative to not only understand but to prioritize the needs of infants, toddlers, and their families. When people know better, they do better. The early years are extremely important. I've witnessed the success of home visiting firsthand. It was extremely beneficial for my family and influenced me to become a home visitor myself.