

Hello, good morning. To the Children and Human Services Committee, Chair Andrea White, and Ranking Member Crystal Lett, thank you for being here and giving the opportunity to testify. My name is Angelique Cunningham and This is my story:

My daughter, a woman who has faced more challenges in life than anyone should, experienced a mental health crisis that led to her four young children—all under the age of 10—being placed in my care. As a grandmother, I stepped up without hesitation, because family is everything. But what I didn't expect was how broken the system designed to help families like mine truly is.

When Cuyahoga County placed the children in my care a month ago, I was given a \$150 gift card for groceries. That was it. For much longer than I should have, I relied on my only source of income—my disability check—to provide for these four little ones. I spent my own money on food, clothing, and other essentials, all while managing my own health challenges. I'm currently on oxygen and have had several visits to the hospital. Yet, I've done everything I can to keep these children safe, loved, and cared for.

It took time, but I eventually received some help through the kinship caregiver program. Still, the process has been anything but clear. Even now, after two years of caring for them, I still don't have custody and am being told I need a bigger home to keep them. At the same time, I'm not receiving help to achieve this. My social worker admitted to not knowing anything about housing assistance and hasn't reached out in an effective way to get it for me and my children. I am afraid of losing them, they are my life, and they couldn't be in better care than with me.

For me, the system is inconsistent, confusing, and often unsupportive. I'm left feeling like the payments I receive are just enough to keep me afloat, but not enough to truly thrive or provide the stability these children deserve. I'm not asking for much—just peace of mind. I want to know that these children, who have already been through so much, can stay with me in a home where I'll be able to meet their needs. I want a system that works for families, not against them.

This is not just my story—it's the story of countless kinship caregivers across our state who are stepping up to care for children in crisis. I want clarity about my rights and what's expected of me, and the tools to succeed in that. We need a system that prioritizes keeping families together, rather than creating unnecessary barriers to that end. Kinship care has been found to lead better outcomes for children, and the number of kids in kinship care is extensive, with more than 200,000 here in Ohio.

What I want to ask today is that -

Ohio must increase its support for kinship caregivers. Payments need to be increased to support caregivers and their children. We need laws that ensure families understand their rights and options from the start. We need consistent, compassionate support from social workers who are equipped to guide us through the process. We need housing assistance that allows us to provide safe, stable homes for these children. Please, don't let another family go through what I've endured. These children deserve better. Families like mine deserve better. It's time to fix the system—not just for us, but for the future of our communities.

Thank you