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**Ohio House Children & Human Services Committee
H.B. 7
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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 House Bill 7. My name is Malissa Harris, and I am a Policy Associate at Groundwork Ohio, a statewide, nonpartisan public-policy research and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring every young child in Ohio has access to high-quality early learning and healthy development opportunities.

House Bill 7 prioritizes Ohio’s most vulnerable children and the caregivers who support them. By making foster and kinship caregivers eligible for publicly funded child care, this legislation acknowledges both the unique challenges these families face and the importance of providing children in the child welfare system with stability and high-quality early learning experiences.

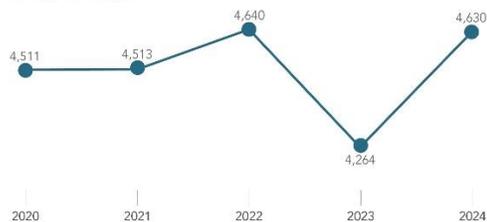
Supporting Children in Foster and Kinship Care

Ohio’s youngest children are experiencing adversity at alarming rates. In 2024, nearly 6,000 children under age six were in Public Children Services Agency (PCSA) custody, making up 42% of all children in state custody. The vast majority of these children have endured Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)—including abuse, neglect, or household instability, placing them at heightened risk for developmental, emotional, and academic challenges.

Early childhood adversity & trauma prevention

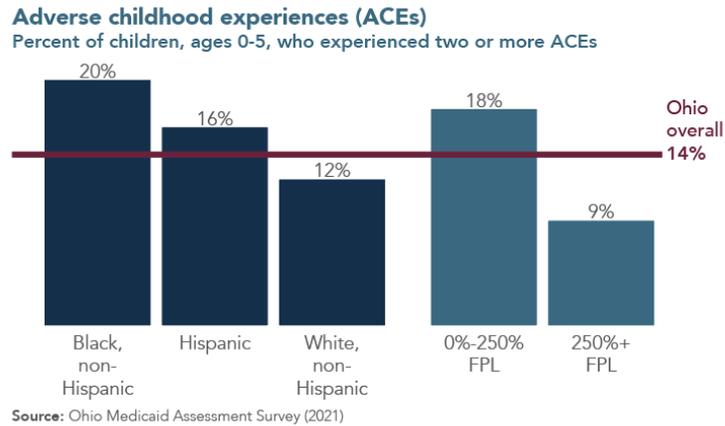
Protective custody

Number of children, ages 0-5, who were in Public Children Service Agency (PCSA) custody, point-in-time count as of January 1 of each year



Source: Ohio Department of Children and Youth

14% of Ohio’s youngest children have experienced two or more ACEs, a level of trauma that significantly impacts their long-term health and well-being.



When children experience trauma, their brains and bodies react in ways that can disrupt healthy development. Without intervention and supports, these children face higher risks of mental health challenges, academic difficulties, and chronic health conditions. The good news is that loving caregivers and high-quality child care can be a powerful protective factor.

Supporting Foster and Kinship Caregivers

The individuals who step forward to care for children in the child welfare system are doing important work in our communities. Foster parents and kinship caregivers—often grandparents, aunts, uncles, or family friends—play a crucial role in providing stability, love, and support for children who have already endured significant trauma. But too often, these caregivers are left without the resources they need to balance work, financial responsibilities, and caregiving. Child care is a major financial burden for many foster and kinship families, and House Bill 7 would help relieve that strain.



Foster parents and kinship caregivers frequently step in during emergencies, meaning they may not have the financial preparation to suddenly support a child full-time. The cost of child care is a major financial burden. In Ohio, full-time infant care costs an average of \$12,351 per year, and toddler care costs \$11,125, often more than a mortgage or rent payment. Without financial support, these costs can be overwhelming for foster and kinship caregivers.

I spent nine years working in child care and this is a story of a great aunt who became the kinship caregiver for her young nephew after his mother was deemed unfit due to severe mental health challenges. She stepped in because she firmly believed that family should stay together, and she wanted to provide him with the stability and love he deserved. However, despite her best efforts, she faced a difficult financial reality. She wanted him to continue attending the early learning center he had been at since birth—a place where he felt safe and comfortable. But due to the high cost of child care, she was forced to move him to a lower-rated program simply because it was more affordable.

Children experiencing separation from a parent endure immense emotional and developmental stress. A disruption in their early learning environment only adds to that hardship. House Bill 7 would ensure that children like her nephew have categorical eligibility for child care, allowing them to maintain consistency in their care and education—something that is essential for their well-being.”

How House Bill 7 Supports Foster and Kinship Families

By making publicly funded child care available to foster and kinship caregivers, House Bill 7 would:

- Reduce financial stress on families. Providing access to publicly funded child care ensures that no caregiver is forced to choose between financial stability and providing a loving home for a child.
- Encourage more people to step forward as foster or kinship caregivers. The need for foster and kinship placements continues to grow, yet many potential caregivers are hesitant to take on this role due to financial and logistical concerns. By easing the burden of child care, House Bill 7 could increase the number of families willing to provide a safe and nurturing home for children in need.

By making publicly funded child care available to foster and kinship caregivers, this bill recognizes the urgent needs of our child welfare system and the role that early learning and stability play in a child’s future success.

I want to thank Representatives White and Ray for their leadership on this issue and for recognizing the urgent need to support foster and kinship families. We urge this committee to pass House Bill 7 and ensure that every child in Ohio has the opportunity to grow up in a stable, nurturing environment.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions from the committee.

To learn more about the data referenced in this testimony, view Groundwork Ohio's [Early Childhood Data Dashboard 2025](#).