



Safe Children, Stable Families, Supportive Communities

House Children and Human Services Committee
Proponent Testimony on HB 7
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Good morning, Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on HB7, *Make certain caregivers eligible for publicly funded child care*. I am Mary Wachtel, the Director of Public Policy for the Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO). PCSAO is a membership-driven association of Ohio's 88 county Public Children Services Agencies that advocates for sound public policy, promotes program excellence, and builds public value for safe children, stable families, and supportive communities.

PCSAO thanks Representatives White and Ray for their leadership in sponsoring this bill designed to remove a significant barrier for kinship and foster caregivers--the high cost of child care. This is a testament to their passion and commitment to Ohio's most vulnerable children and their families.

When the court determines that a child cannot remain safely at home, the county PCSA must find a safe place that can meet the child's needs for healing, treatment, and returning home. PCSAs search first for kin caregivers (a relative, close family friend, or another adult known and trusted by the child and family) who can step in to maintain family connections and minimize the trauma of separation. If no kin are available, the child may be placed with a family foster home or, in some cases, in a group home or children's residential facility.

Supporting these kinship and foster caregivers so they can provide a loving, stable home for the child and support reunification is critical. Licensed foster caregivers receive a modest "per diem" to pay for

routine costs of caring for the child. Kin who are not licensed may receive some financial support through the Kinship Support Program (time-limited support for six months), the Ohio Works First Program (a child-only cash benefit), or a county's Prevention, Retention, and Contingency program (PRC, which is TANF-funded). PCSAs also provide support for incidental expenses such as clothing, cribs, beds, etc. Some PCSAs are able to provide additional support such as a modest monthly stipend or child care assistance for those who do not qualify for publicly funded child care. You will hear examples of that from my colleagues from the Summit County Children Services Board and from Montgomery County who are testifying today.

As this Committee has heard during budget testimony over these last several weeks, child care is unaffordable for many Ohio families. It is no wonder, then, that limited support for child care creates barriers for potential kinship caregivers and foster caregivers who may well want to open their home to a child, and also to those who have already done so and are struggling to maintain that child with them. And that is why HB7 is so important—by guaranteeing publicly funded child care (PFCC) to these caregivers regardless of income, more children can stay with kin and in family foster homes while their parents work on reunification. Having said that, we do recognize that growth in the PFCC may be unsustainable after several years and are open to other mechanisms by which Ohio can achieve the goal of providing meaningful child care support to kinship and foster caregivers.

PCSAO requests the Committee's consideration of going a step further to assure child care access for caregivers. Providing child care assistance regardless of income is crucial. However, caregivers are still required to participate in employment/education/training to qualify. As a result, nonworking and retired caregivers will be shut out of the program. This is especially concerning for kinship caregivers who are more likely to be poor, single, older, less educated, and unemployed than other families.¹

¹ Population Reference Bureau's analysis of the 2009, 2010, and 2011 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Surveys.

Unlike foster caregivers who proactively decide to take the step to foster and then go through training and certification over a number of months before accepting their first child for placement, kinship caregivers are typically notified and asked to consider caring for their kin children on much shorter notice, leaving little time to prepare. While kinship families value the rewards of caregiving, the reality is many experience hardship by taking on the full-time care of additional children.

For these reasons, we request that the Committee consider amending the bill to provide flexibility on the employment/education/training requirements in certain circumstances. For example, this could be for retired caregivers, for those unable to work, or for those who need regular respite in order to keep caring for the child. Full-time child caring, especially for children who are not yet school age, is hard work even in ideal situations. Think of what it must be like for retired grandparents, or for relatives who have health issues, or for those blessed with an extremely active kin child who needs especially close, constant supervision.

In addition to stabilizing and supporting the placement of the child, quality child care helps assure kindergarten readiness. As our colleagues at Groundwork Ohio so ably remind us all, children who enter school ready to learn are more likely to demonstrate stronger math, reading, and social skills later in life; children who enter kindergarten unprepared are at a disadvantage for future success. This is an opportunity to provide children who have been removed from their homes with the experience and tools for success in school.

PCSAO urges the Committee's support for HB7 and for providing additional flexibility on the employment/education/training requirements in certain circumstances. This additional flexibility make good sense and is an opportunity to make a good bill even better.

Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.