

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the committee,

Thank for the opportunity to hear my testimony in support of House Bill 7. My name is Bethany Sibbitt and I have had the honor of serving the families of Montgomery County as a foster caregiver since 2020. My hope is that by sharing, you can see that this bill ultimately benefits the vulnerable children and their families in our communities.

I started this process as a single person working full-time, so one of the considerations that came up repeatedly in the licensing process was the logistics of how to do this successfully in a single-adult household. I was and am fortunate to have a solid support system and a reasonably flexible job which eased some of that burden. However, there is no way around needing full-time childcare in my particular situation. I became licensed as some of pandemic restrictions were starting to lift and began looking into potential childcare options. I quickly realized that the unknowns of when a placement would occur and number and ages of the children made securing childcare in advance essentially a fool's errand. I knew that in order to utilize the childcare stipend available through the county, I would need to use a licensed provider yet the options available weren't a numerous as one would think. And almost all of these facilities have waitlists. I was fortunate to connect with a licensed center through another foster parent who was understanding of the unknowns of accepting a placement. When I received my first call for a placement, I was able to get her established at this center and they have been willing to work with me ever since. This center is smaller and family-owned and I imagine this type of relationship would not be possible in a larger or more franchised center. Without this very unique relationship, I would be left scrambling to coordinate childcare with each and every placement.

The aforementioned stipend, while helpful and appreciated, is meager at best. The center that I use is fairly reasonable and even then less than half of the tuition rate is covered by the childcare stipend, an amount that I have been told has not been update in quite some time. While the mileage reimbursement has been updated at least annually, the childcare rate has not been updated in the 4.5 years since I started my licensure process. Foster caregivers do receive a daily board stipend which covers the remaining amount, however that leaves only about \$30 per week to provide the rest of the child's needs. If I was using a more expensive center, likely all of the state-provided assistance would go to childcare alone.

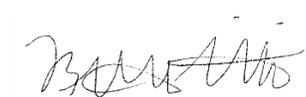
Some of the discrepancies in assistance available to children in care are health insurance, access to WIC, and access to Title 20. Children in care are usually covered under Medicaid regardless of who has legal custody of the child. WIC is a phenomenally helpful resource designed to combat nutritional deficiencies in vulnerable families. Children in foster care

automatically qualify for WIC because their “income”, or lack thereof, is used to meet the income threshold. Compare that to Title 20 which uses the income of the caregivers to determine eligibility for childcare assistance. Most foster caregivers are over income to qualify. Compare this to a state like Delaware that has Purchase of Care in place. My understanding is that even though this too is typically income-based, children in care automatically qualify. Purchase of Care is also tied to the child themselves which potentially aids in major transitions during reunification because that would remain in place for the biological families and would mean that the child could potentially stay in a familiar environment during a major adjustment period rather than the limbo of parents having to wait for custody to be awarded to start the Title 20 application process.

The barriers of the rising cost of childcare along with the difficulty in securing a spot in a licensed center or with a licensed provider are huge challenges for caregivers seeking to stand in the gap for these vulnerable children. I know of many homes that have changed their age-range to school age and up. In homes where the demographic is impossible to have a full-time caregiver at home, childcare is a basic necessity that is far more difficult to coordinate compared to their healthcare and nutritional needs. These early formative years are crucial to laying a developmental foundation that will serve these kids for the rest of their lives. I firmly believe that part of our role as foster caregivers is to do everything in our power to get them access to the resources needed while they are in my care.

Sincerely,

Bethany Sibbitt

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bethany Sibbitt", written in a cursive style.