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Testimony on House Bill 647

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on HB 647. My name is Pam Lowe and I represent Kids in the Ridge Early Learning Program, LLC in Trumbull county. I also hope to be speaking for the children and families that rely on us to provide quality early childhood education as well as my fellow professionals who also provide publicly funded child care.

I have been in this field for 36 years and have provided publicly funded child care along with care for private pay families in that time. I am providing testimony in opposition of this proposed bill as it will further weaken an already struggling system. I deeply care about all of the children that we have currently in our program, those that we have served in the past, as well as those that we hope to serve in the future. The opportunity for children to receive high quality early childhood education plays an important role in their future. The stronger the foundation a child is given, the more likely they are to become successful members of our communities. For working parents, our services give them the opportunity to work, train or seek further education to better their lives and those of their children.

I have seen the changes in attendance and billing systems from all paper sign in, to the swipe card system, and now for years we have had the tap system. This system has many safeguards. If used as intended, it can be used to flag, prevent and safeguard against fraud without investing millions of dollars in a new system. When DCY conducts their over 10,000 health and safety inspections annually, an evaluation could be added to their inspection procedure. This could include a focused integrity review of the program by verifying that the children who are tapped in for the day are included on an attendance sheet in their classroom and that they are actually in attendance. This would provide another check of the system in real time.

Integrity reviews or audits have been part of the system for years. During these audits, a representative will show up unannounced at the facility and collect the original attendance sheets for the specified time period. When there is an overpayment and repayment, in the majority of the cases it is not due to fraud. Many times, the child was in attendance, but there are errors by staff in regards to the correct time being recorded or not recorded at all. On some occasions parents will make an error in the process. I support repayment in these cases because policies and procedures were not followed, but it is not accurate to refer to this as fraud.

We already struggle to find and retain qualified and dependable staff. With the funding that is available it is hard to find a balance of what families can afford and what it costs to provide quality programming. This struggle will increase if more is added to our duties. All three of our

administrators spend much of their time in the classroom serving as teachers. We currently keep paper attendance for all children in our program in addition to the PFCC tablet tapped attendance. If electronic attendance is added as well, that is just another task for our staff and another chance of having an error made in the process.

A program should not have their license or contract suspended or terminated solely on the suspicion of fraud. The facts need to be verified, hearings and due process need to occur. Definitions need to be clear in regards to fraud, misuse and intent.

Families should not be left without child care if they cannot find a single provider who has operating hours for all of the days and hours that they need care for their children.

Payment based on enrollment is what private pay families are required to do in the majority of facilities. Expenses for our businesses do not change in regards to the cost of operating, including payroll if a child who is scheduled to come does not attend that day.

A change in the number of hours children must attend to reach each payment category began in November. As providers, we do whatever we can to accommodate our families and shield them from the negative effects of such changes. However, it is getting to a point now where economically we have to make decisions whether or not we can continue to provide part time care to families for less than 33 hours per week. Those children still take a full time slot but we are paid a part time rate. When payment on enrollment was set to begin in July of this year, it was part of the formula we used in making such determinations. That has already been taken away for this year and now they want to remove that option for 2028.

If DCY is referring fraud cases to prosecuting agencies and they are choosing not to prosecute, that definitely needs to be addressed.

We should be strengthening our child care system, not taking money from a program put in place to make child care more affordable and using it to address widespread fraud in Ohio's publicly funded system. Fraud that has not even been proven or accurately documented and evaluated.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide opponent testimony today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.