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Chair Thomas, Vice-chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Synenberg, and members of the House Judiciary Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony for Senate Bill 174, which regards the allocation of parental responsibilities, with my Joint Sponsor Senator Theresa Gavarone.

We know that parents working together is most often in a child's best interest. The purpose of this legislation is to enact laws that fully recognize the value of parents and guardians cooperating for a child's best interest, including through the allocations of parenting time. We listened to the many Ohioans deeply invested in this issue, and we crafted a bill that moves Ohio's Family courts in the right direction towards all Ohio children's best interest. Following the wisdom of the biblical story of King Solomon, we know that no good parent would ever want to "split the baby in half", so we are moving Ohio courts towards parental agreement standards that don't make children feel metaphorically "split" in tense or untenable situations.

Born from the recommendations of the 2005 Ohio Supreme Court Task Force on Family Law and Children, this legislation seeks to modify the language of the Ohio Revised Code pertaining to children involved in co-parenting arrangements. This taskforce was comprised of 24 individuals from across the state and 9 different disciplines, including the then-Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the State of Ohio, former Governors, various judges and members of the Ohio Bar Association, and many others. Additional input was provided to this task force through field-experts who testified at their hearings to impart their findings on Family Courts in Ohio and best-practices.

The number one goal of the task force was to establish and maintain parent-child relationships that are fundamental to the well-being of the child. This legislation then seeks to act

on that goal by aligning the language of the Ohio Revised Code with this core value in mind. Furthermore, as the social landscapes of our state continue to change and family arrangements increasingly involve unmarried parents and other guardian relationships, my joint sponsor and I saw a dire need for the Ohio Revised Code to catch up to the times.

Among the key recommendations for implementing this goal are: Ohio Revised Code language that reflects both parents have continuing roles and responsibilities as parents when they are not living together, and encouraging courts to utilize a single-document to designate the "parenting plan" for a family that provides clear allocations of parental functions and responsibilities for all aspects of each child's daily needs. The functions and responsibilities in the "parenting plan" document would be composed in a manner that is consistent with the child's age and developmental level and it would have increased statutory options for courts to resolve parental disputes related to children involved. The ultimate goal of these changes is to ensure family courts always operate within the "best interest" standard for the children of Ohio.

As an attorney who has practiced in the courts of family law for many years now, I see these legislative changes as essential to fostering healthy family dynamics here in Ohio. Over the past year, Senator Gavarone and I have worked closely with the counsel of the Ohio Supreme Court to ensure that this new legislation helps to enact a crucial step forward for the Family Courts and the children of Ohio. One such example of provisions which I believe will help to modernize Ohio Family Courts and encourage compassionate, thoughtful rulings is a provision to require that courts not draw any presumptions or consider any temporary orders when allocating parenting responsibilities or approving a parenting plan.[1]

This does not mean that a child will automatically be placed in unsafe situations without any regard for their well-being. Courts may still deny a request for equal parenting time, but only if it is not in the best interest of the child, it endangers the safety of the parties, or for other reasonable cause shown.[2] The court will be required to make written findings to support that

[1] [R.C. 3109.0411]
[2] [R.C. 3109.046]

denial, but this legislation will allow for an initial assumption in Family Courts that best interest for a child would be time spent with both parents.

Aside from personal experience, research has also shown that co-parenting is important. A systematic review on different children's outcomes based on post-separation outcomes found that while a nuclear parenting style resulted in the best outcome, 75% of the time, a co-parenting compromise has equal results. This study also found that maintaining a relationship with both parents outweighs the potential drawbacks, such as stress, from moving between different households in order to fulfill custody requirements. Additionally, it was found that children with a lone parent arrangement have fewer relationship and economic resources compared to children in nuclear or shared custody.

Much of this legislation is filled with the jargon of the courts, however, some other notable changes that will be made through Senate Bill 174 are clarifications in the child support process, simplification of paternity establishment, and clarifying parental responsibilities. At its core, this legislation is about bringing our family courts into the 21st century and looking at the years of experience from the individuals on this taskforce to start implementing best-practices across the state of Ohio.

I urge the committee to schedule proponent testimony for SB 174. This will not only allow for a thorough discussion of the bill's provisions but also provide an opportunity for the public to voice their support and concerns. My hope is that we can continue to do what is best for the future of Ohio: our state's families and children. Thank you.