

Chair Citrino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Finance Committee:

My name is Kelly Morris, and I serve as the Health Commissioner for Carroll County and President of the Ohio Public Health Association and have served my 30-year public health career as a public health nurse in 3 health departments across Ohio. I'm here to speak in strong support of **Amendment SC0458**, which fully restores funding for Governor DeWine's maternal and infant health initiatives — including the **Family Connects** program.

Family Connects provides **evidence-based home visits** by registered nurses to all new mothers, regardless of income or background. These visits have been proven to improve health outcomes, lower emergency room usage, and connect families to essential community resources — all during the critical postpartum period.

To date, **18 Ohio counties** have received funding for Family Connects. Eleven of those 18 counties are led by local health departments where **Public Health Nurses (PHNs)** are already making a measurable difference. Though Carroll County has not yet received funding, we still provide home visits and the need in our community is stark — and personal, let me provide you context.....

We are a small, rural, Appalachian County. **There is no hospital** within our borders, and no direct interstate access. For pregnant women, that means traveling **at least 45 minutes** to deliver a baby — a delay that can mean life or death in an emergency. But birth is just the beginning of the struggle.

We face a growing **maternal and child health crisis**, driven by poverty, isolation, and a lack of services. There are **only four licensed childcare providers** in the entire county — and that number is shrinking, including HeadStart. Without accessible and affordable childcare, employment becomes nearly impossible, trapping families in generational poverty.

As health professionals, we enter homes that reflect the heartbreaking reality of unmet needs:

- A **3-year-old boy**, likely autistic, is **locked in a bedroom**, fed through a door, and has **never been evaluated or diagnosed**.
- A **young mother** of **premature twins**, discharged on oxygen, lives in a two-bedroom apartment with **eight other adults who all smoke**. There are **no cribs, no safe sleep**.
- A **mother of five** lives under the **tight control of her husband**, with signs of coercive control and possible **human trafficking**, but remains invisible to the systems that might help.

These families are not neglectful — they are overwhelmed, under-resourced, and unseen.

Ohio ranks 43rd in infant mortality. That statistic should not be okay with anyone. Nearly **40% of new moms miss postpartum checkups** due to lack of transportation, childcare, or unpaid

leave. That means serious risks to both mom's and babies— like postpartum depression and hypertension — go unaddressed. Home visits by PHNs **bridge that gap**.

And the results —speak for themselves:

Infant mortality among participants in all home visiting programs studied by the **Ohio State University's Government Resource Center followed more than 8,000 pregnant women in Ohio** who participated in home visiting programs from 2019-2023. Infant mortality among participants in home visiting programs was 2.7 per 1,000 births, less than half the statewide average of 6.7 per 1,000 for the same period (2019-2023). Which translates to an average of 850 babies dying before age one. Sixty-seven (67%) of these deaths are preventable with interventions such as home visiting 570 babies a year could be saved.

In addition, those with access to home visiting programs had

- **Fewer ER visits** in the baby's first year- attributing to less healthcare spending, less worker absenteeism.
- **Lower rates of postpartum depression- healthier mom's and healthier babies**
- More families connected to **life-saving resources and, as mentioned above,**
- **Infant mortality rates cut in half.**

You may ask Why Nurses? Don't we have home visiting programs provided by less expensive professionals? PHNs bring deep clinical knowledge, trusted relationships with providers, and the ability to build care plans tailored to each family. With Family Connects, we can meet families **where they are** — at home, in that critical first three weeks of life. Additionally, of the 130,000 live births annually in Ohio, less than 3% receive state sponsored home visits.

Our families love their children. **What they lack is a system that supports them.**

Please support Amendment SC0458, which fully restores funding for Governor DeWine's maternal and infant health initiatives — including the Family Connects program. Your leadership can make Ohio a place where every baby gets a safe start, every mother has a fighting chance, and every family can thrive.

Thank you.