

Senate Finance Committee
Testimony on Am Sub HB 96
June 5, 2025
Jody Walker, Executive Director
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Good morning, Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on HB 96. My name is Jody Walker, and I am director of South Central Ohio Job and Family Services (SCOJFS) in southeastern Ohio, serving Hocking, Ross, and Vinton counties. SCOJFS is a quadruple-combined agency with public assistance programs, child support enforcement, social services including child protective services, and workforce development. I have been a county director since 1999, yet I have not seen such a challenging time in the child welfare system as I do today in 2025, specifically in terms of the needs of our children and placement costs.

I am here to speak to the importance of the state/county partnership in children services. As a local PCSA, my staff and I are on the front lines of protecting children and stabilizing families on behalf of the state. We embrace this mandate, but, because it is a mandate, I as an agency director cannot control costs. PCSAs do not take custody of children, we are ordered custody – and we cannot say no. Nor can we ignore the calls for reports of abuse/neglect/dependency. For example, one recent call resulted in the agency being awarded temporary custody of an 11-year-old girl with severe behavioral issues. The only placement option was a residential facility, which required her to be the only child on her floor, with intensive supervision. The daily cost of the placement was \$2,000 per day, equating to \$60,000 per month.

As children diverted from other systems enter foster care, the demand for scarce beds pushes costs higher and higher. Because we cannot say no, we are required to find placement or risk children sleeping in the office, which happens at least once per month in my agency.

This ongoing statewide treatment/placement crisis can be summed up in three key points:

- Between 2020 and 2024, placement costs¹ have risen 68% (by \$158M) even as the number of kids in PCSA custody and in paid settings has declined by 9% (by 1,120).
- Placement costs have increased across all settings and have outpaced inflation – foster homes by 29%, group homes by 64%, and residential treatment facilities by 54%.
- Counties pay nearly three-quarters of all placement costs; federal reimbursement covers the remaining one-quarter.

South Central Ohio Job and Family Services comprises Ross, Hocking, and Vinton counties. The cost of care in our three-county area has increased by 152%, from \$3,993,000 in 2015, to \$10,083,000 in 2024. In Ross County, the cost has increased even higher, by 165%, from \$2,395,000 in 2015 to \$6,343,000 in 2024.

Even having property tax levies in each of the three counties, specifically for child welfare cost of care, the commissioners have had to budget additional funds from the general revenue fund. The issue is not an increase in the number of children in care, as we have averaged 185 kids per month in care across the three counties for the past ten years, but rather in the complexity and severity of needs our children are displaying when they enter agency custody.

My agency, and children services agencies across the state, are doing everything we can to meet these demands; we fully maximize the GRF funds we receive through the State Child Protection Allocation

¹ Placement costs are the expenses associated with the care and maintenance of a child in foster care. In addition to room and board, placement costs may include expenses associated with the child's special needs (such as increased supervision), other items such as clothing, special diets, personal incidentals, and transportation. Placement costs also include a portion of the placement setting's administrative costs. Medicaid covers most treatment and services for children in foster care.

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(SCPA) each year; where possible, we divert other state and federal funding sources that come into our agencies to children services; many of us rely on our local community support through children services levies; and most of us receive county GRF routinely as part of the county budget and too often we receive it on an emergency basis when placement costs exceed our budgets.

This is why the state/county partnership is so critical and why we prefer and need the House-passed version of funding for PCSAs included in the Department of Children and Youth's line item 830506. I respectfully request your support of amendment SC_136_2802: *Restore the Senate sub-bill cuts to the state child protection allocation.*

In closing, I ask for your full consideration and support for the children services system at the local level to assist struggling agencies – like mine – trying to survive. At the end of the day, these are our kids and they become our adults. They deserve to have the best care we can give them. I fear with the system as it is today, we are too often falling way too short of this goal. Our youth get one childhood – if we do not invest properly in this system, we will continue to see consequences for the youth and upstream effects on our other adult-centered systems for years to come.

Thank you and I am happy to answer any questions.