

Testimony to the Senate Health Committee regarding increased funding for kinship care

Committee Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, ranking member, Hicks-Hudson and the other members of the Senate Health Committee: my name is Larry Bresler. I have been an active member of the Northern Ohioans for Budget Legislation Equality (NOBLE) since it began in 2003. I am also a social worker who has taught for the past 18 years at Case Western Reserve University's Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, their school of social work.

I am here today to urge you increase the budgetary amount allocated for kinship care in the 2026-2027 state budget. As you are aware kinship care is the raising of children who can no longer live with their parents (either permanently or temporarily) by grandparents, other close family members, or other adults with whom they have a close family like relationship. In study after study, it has been found that children who have to be removed from their biological parents fare far better in kinship care over foster care for a variety of reasons, a few of which include

- It minimizes trauma for the children,
- It improves children's well-being.
- Improves their behavioral and mental health outcomes
- They have better educational outcomes and stability
- It provides a greater opportunity for continued family connections with an opportunity for family reunification.

As a result of these many studies the federal government for decades has mandated a preference for kinship care.

42 U.S.C. 671, says states must *"consider giving preference to an adult relative over a nonrelated caregiver when determining placement for a child, provided that the relative caregiver meets all relevant state child protection standards."*

However, many kinship care givers or potential kinship care givers particularly grandparents are not financially able to assume the responsibility of being kinship care legal guardians. Many are low-income or on fixed income. NOBLE has worked with or been in contact with grandparents with big hearts who would love to be kinship care givers for their grandchildren but do not have the financial resources to do so. We have also worked with many others who are kinship care givers but are regularly struggling to put food on their tables, provide all of the housing needs or afford other important needs for the children.

Nevertheless, in the budget passed two years ago and the executive budget that Gov. DeWine proposed this year, there has been a substantial increase for funding for foster care and adoption while there has been no increase for kinship care. It was very disappointing that notwithstanding the federal mandate for kinship care, he requested no additional money for kinship care, from what has previously been allocated. In all likelihood most of those

15,000 children would prefer to be in a kinship care placement and they would have fared better in that setting. Furthermore, in the 2024-2025 budget, he defunded The Kinship Caregiver Program, which was funded at \$10 million per year in the last biennium budget. The program provided one-time stabilization expenses, such as cribs or beds for children and short-term reimbursement for childcare for kinship caregivers.

The lack of proper support for kinship care givers has been reflected in placement of children who have been removed from their parents by county human service departments. For example, in the last year in Cuyahoga County well over half of the placements of children removed from their parents have been with foster care or other juvenile home placements rather than kinship care.

Consequently, we ask for the following:

- Increase caregiver payments to \$600 per month for each child for TANF OWF "Child Only" (This is the program that provides funding for kinship caregivers)
- Have payments equal for each child (Ohio decreases payments after the first child)
- Restore and expand Kinship Care Child Assistance Program which provided funds for one-time special needs.
- Restore and expand specially designated funds for childcare for kinship care parents. HB 7 moves us very much in that direction and should be incorporated into the state budget.

In conclusion, we should be moving Ohio toward equity of kinship care with foster care payments. Kinship Care providers should receive allowances to adequately meet the needs of providing care for the children in their care including food, shelter, transportation, childcare, and other necessities.

Thank you
Larry Bresler