

June 6, 2017

Senator Oelslager, Chair, and Members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee:

My name is Mark Butler and I reside in Whitehall, Ohio and I am a parent of a young man that fell under that category of a “multi-system youth.” I am here today because I believe it is wrong to force any parent to surrender custody of their child in order for them to access necessary treatment. My friends, my family, and my fellow Ohioans agree that this has to stop. The Ohio Senate has an opportunity to make a difference and spare Ohio families the pain, suffering, and stigma that comes with custody relinquishment.

My son Andrew Butler is developmentally disabled, having been profoundly affected by autism and an intellectual disability. Like most severely disabled children in Ohio, Andrew benefited from home-based services and special education programs for most of his life. As Andrew grew into adolescence, he became prone to violent outbursts which caused him to be expelled from school and to become a danger to our family.

Private insurance and Medicaid were unable to pay for the residential treatment Andrew needed. In 2014, my wife and I were forced to surrender custody of our son to Franklin County Children’s Services in order to obtain the necessary funding for his treatment. Our devastation was compounded by the fact that Andrew was placed into a treatment facility near Ironton, Ohio – two hours away from our family home.

Andrew is non-verbal. Andrew cannot read or write. Andrew cannot “face-time” or “Skype.” The only way to have a relationship with him is through proximity. To us, Ironton felt like it might as well be the moon. We were lucky, some of Ohio’s multi-system youth are placed in facilities out of state. For nearly two-years, we made a weekly pilgrimage to see our son. Even that first weekend, when we were not permitted to see him, just to be close to him.

After turning eighteen last year, Andrew has been able to return to our custody and our community. Not every family is able to obtain the same happy conclusion to the struggles they face with their multi-system children. Most suffer in silence: ashamed to admit that they live in fear of their own child or afraid that they will lose their child forever.

It does not have to be this way. Last year, Ohio’s Joint Legislative Committee on Multi-System Youth issued recommendations to help families like ours. These recommendations need funding. I am asking that you utilize already available funds, unspent Temporary Assistance for Needy Families funds (TANF), which will not impact your efforts to balance the budget, but will help Multi System youth such as our son Andrew

Thank you for your consideration.

Mark Butler