



COALITION OF CARE



Safe Families *for* Children

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Proponent Testimony on Senate Bill 6 - Temporary Child Hosting with Host Families**

**Senate Health Committee
June 25, 2019**

Chairman Merrin, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Boyd, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about Senate Bill 6.

My name is Chris Combs and I am the Executive Director of Coalition of Care and Catalyst for Safe Families for Children in Ohio. I am here today in strong support of Senate Bill 6. It is my hope that my testimony today will help all to better understand this unique model that is having a significant positive impact on children around the state.

The Host Family Model

The Host Family model exists to encourage and recruit families who are compelled by care and compassion to open their home to vulnerable children in the community. There are strict guidelines in place to train and vet those families to assure safety. Following appropriate screening, our continuous goal is to unleash Host Families to stand in the gap for vulnerable children and struggling families in Ohio.

Voluntary Serving Vulnerable Children & Families

This hosting model is compelling because it is purely voluntary - in both directions. The Host Families voluntarily agree to care for children, not for reasons of compensation (there is no daily stipend), but rather for reasons of compassion and empathy. The Referring Parents voluntarily request that a Host Family host their children for a temporary period, so that the parents have the margin to get back on their feet.

Addressing Common Parental Challenges

The Referring Parent, the adult with legal custody of the children who is asking for help from the Host Family, is typically facing three common challenges:

1. **Poverty** – the Referring Parent is typically mired in various levels of poverty, which means they have a fundamental lack of resources to varying degrees.

2. **Isolation** – the Referring Parent is socially isolated, for various reasons, which means they have nobody to turn to, nobody to lean on.
3. **Crisis** – the Referring Parent encounters a crisis, which can range from relatively mild (e.g. a car breaks down, a medical emergency) to intensely complex (eviction, substance use disorder).

Medical Coverage

Children who are hosted retain their current Medicaid coverage. If a hosted child needs medical attention, our standard protocol ensues. The custodial parent is contacted, for input, for advice, and if necessary, to meet the child and the Host Family at an appropriate medical facility. The medical expenses of the child are covered by their relevant Medicaid benefits. The Host Family retains a power of attorney for medical care, signed by the custodial parent, to meet the medical needs in the event that the custodial parent is not available.

Legal Custody

The Host Family model allows the custodial parent to retain legal custody of his/her children. It is important that we are clear--these are not circumstances of abuse or neglect. We always defer those cases to foster care.

These are also not circumstances of legal challenges or custody battles. We always defer those cases to the court system. These are simply circumstances of parents who are under-resourced, isolated, and over-stressed. And yet we see that these parents love their children. They are seeking help in caring for their children; they don't want to lose their children.

Collaboration

We have worked in good faith with several stakeholders on this legislation including the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services, Ohio Judicial Conference and the Public Children Services Association of Ohio. We believe the bill is a result of many conversations centered around a common goal of helping vulnerable children in our state.

Host Family Model Active in Ohio

There are currently four Safe Families chapters operating in Ohio. Back in 2011, myself and other leaders in Ohio who are passionate about caring for vulnerable children and struggling families wanted to do something proactive and preventative to serve this vulnerable population, and to provide preventive measures that help keep some children from unnecessarily entering the over-burdened foster system.

We learned about the national model of Safe Families for Children (SFFC) – a faith-based Host Family model that had been launched in Chicago in 2003. Safe Families has a 15-year track record of safely hosting vulnerable children, serving families with children of any background, ages birth – 18 years. Safe Families chapters now operate in 108 cities in the United States and have safely hosted hundreds of thousands of children. Safe Families is dedicated to safety, following the safety best practices of the foster system.

2018 Outcomes

In Ohio, we hosted our first child in June 2013 in Cincinnati. Since then, the Safe Families model has expanded to Greater Cleveland, Greater Dayton and Greater Columbus.

Below are hosting results from 2018:

Safe Families Chapters in Ohio:	CINCINNATI	CLEVELAND	DAYTON	COLUMBUS	TOTALS
Launch Date:	6/1/2013	10/1/2016	8/1/2017	10/1/2017	
Number of Nights Children Hosted 2018:	1,663	416	784	1,395	4,258
Number of Children Hosted in 2018:	214	81	15	26	336

Consider the following perspective on the total number of “Nights Children were Hosted in 2018”:

- **4,258 nights** that a child was safe and nurtured in the home of a Host Family.
- **4,258 nights** that a child was not sleeping in the vehicle of a homeless parent, not living in a home that lacked beds or winter heat, not living in an environment of drug abuse, or trafficking.
- **4,258 nights** that a parent knew their child was safe and nurtured, confident their child would be reunified with them as soon as that parent is ready.

In Ohio, over the **six-year history of Host Families, children have been kept safe and nurtured over 20,000 nights.** For a safety perspective, in those hosting situations there have been zero child fatalities, zero children abused, zero children neglected, zero substantiated accusations, and zero false accusations. In every single instance, all hosted children were kept safe and nurtured.

Evidence Based Practice

Safe Families recently completed a 4-year random control study, resulting in a paper from researchers at the University of North Carolina that is under review at the *Journal of the Society of Social Work and Research*. It has been provisionally accepted for publication. The key learning is that the SFFC intervention produced statistically significant improvements in two outcomes: no protective custody and deflection from foster care.

Conclusion

We believe this legislation is important for many reasons. We seek to codify safety best practices for all parties. This will also add clarity to when and how we collaborate with the foster system, and when and how this model differs from the foster system. It will also bring statewide awareness and legitimacy to the Host Family model.

This critical legislation will protect the essential essence of a voluntary Host Family model, that is rooted in compassion and not compensation.

As a former foster dad, an adoptive dad, a current Host Family dad, and one who has the honor of working alongside vulnerable children and struggling families day after day, I want to personally thank each of you for your support of this legislation for the Host Family model.

I would be happy to answer any questions you might have at this time.