



Safe Children, Stable Families, Supportive Communities

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House Health Committee
Interested Party Testimony, SB6
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Good morning Chair Merrin, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Boyd, and members of the Committee. My name is Mary Wachtel, Director of Public Policy for the Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO). I appreciate the opportunity to provide Interested Party testimony on SB6.

PCSAO and our member agencies recognize the need that programs such as Safe Families, the key proponent of this legislation, help to meet. Many families face short-term crises that don't involve abuse or neglect and do not raise safety concerns for the children involved. Instead, they need assistance to get back on their feet. We appreciate that Safe Families, both here in Ohio and in other states, helps families facing those short-term crises.

When we first learned of SB328 (the original version of host family legislation) in the 131st General Assembly, we wondered why legislation was necessary, as host family programs have been operating in Ohio since 2013. Frankly, we remain unconvinced of the need for this legislation. In considering this legislation, we think it is to understand that by putting these provisions into the Ohio Revised Code, this program model is being codified. And from a policy perspective, if the General Assembly takes the step to codify something, (i.e., this program model), then there is an accompanying responsibility to consider if there is appropriate oversight in place and processes laid out if some harm were to come to a child while being hosted. I'm in no way suggesting that this will happen—Safe Families has an excellent track record. But I am speaking from experience knowing that bad things can happen even in the best-intentioned of circumstances.

We have very much appreciated Senator Coley's responsiveness to PCSAO's questions and concerns regarding this legislation, first as SB328, then SB291 (132nd General Assembly), and now SB6. And while

Senators Coley and Hottinger have brought forward a bill that is narrower in scope compared to the earliest version, we remain concerned about possible unintended consequences.

For example, while the bill outlines requirements that the qualified organization must meet (including training and background checks) there is no oversight mechanism in place to ensure that happens. Typically, the oversight function is carried out through a licensing process, but this legislation does not take that approach—rather, it explicitly prohibits certification or supervision of host families by the director of job and family services (Section. 2151.9010). While SB6 requires that employees of qualified organizations be mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect, host families themselves are not, although they are required to report suspected abuse and neglect to the qualified organization. In addition, SB6 allows for a temporary hosting period—under certain circumstances—for up to one year, which can then be extended if the juvenile court determines there are extenuating circumstances. A year is a long time in a young child’s life. Who makes that determination if the child is ready to go home? What qualifications and training do the host family and the qualified organization have to review and help make those critical permanency decisions?

Throughout, PCSAO’s main concern has been to preserve a clear distinction between a host family program and host families, and the public children services system. Children services is a highly regulated, accountable system—as it should be. We operate under federal and state laws and rules; we are publicly accountable for our actions. We have a mandated responsibility to receive and investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect. We can recommend the removal of a child from his/her home and the termination of parental rights. All of these decisions are overseen by the courts and are made in the best interest of the child.

Host family programs are private, voluntary programs that do not operate with these rules, regulations, and accountability. We must be sure that as host family programs grow, they maintain their sole focus on families facing short-term crises other than child abuse or neglect and not unintentionally evolve into an alternate, unregulated foster care system.

Since SB6 passed the Senate, we have learned of other legislative approaches that states are proposing to better balance these issues. We respectfully request that a broader stakeholder process be convened so that these questions can be more fully examined.

We thank Senator Coley, and now Senator Hottinger, for their lead in bringing this legislation forward and believe that by working together we can improve it further. I am available to answer any questions.