



COALITION OF CARE



Safe Families *for* Children

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Senate Health, Human Services, and Medicaid Committee
Proponent Testimony on Senate Bill 6 – Temporary Child Hosting with Host Families
February 19, 2019**

Chairman Burke, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Health, Human Services, and Medicaid 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 you better understand this unique model that is having a significant positive impact on children around the state.

The model of the Host Family is 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 goal is to unleash Host Families to stand in the gap for vulnerable children and struggling families in Ohio

This 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 ability to get back on their feet.

The Referring Parent, the adult with legal custody of the children and 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).

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.

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 they love their children; they don't want to lose them.

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 the same goal of helping vulnerable children in our state.

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 out of the over-burdened foster system.

We learned about 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.

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

To offer some perspective on the total number of “Nights Children were Hosted in 2018”, that means the following:

- **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 heat, not living in an environment of drug abuse, or drug 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 the 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.

We believe this legislation is important for many reasons. We need 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 Senate Bill 6, the Host Family legislation.

Thank you again Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee for allowing me to share this testimony with you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have at this time.

Personal testimonies from referring families

Below are excerpts from notes received from referring families who have had children temporarily stay with Host Families.

Referring Parent in Dayton:

“My journey with Safe Families: In February of 2018, Host Parents Chris and Crystal came into my life. They were wonderful from the very beginning. They were Godly people, so loving and kind, compassionate and understanding. And most of all non-judgmental, which in my situation, being non-judgmental is key.

I'm a recovering heroin addict whose daughter was born drug exposed. I've struggled with addiction and mental health the majority of my life. I've suffered from traumatic experiences, which led me to use drugs as a way to cope. I seemed to only find temporary relief until now.

Recovery has been the best thing that has happened to me because Chris, Crystal, and Safe Families for Children, I was able to continue to have custody of my daughter, Olivia. I have had regular visits with her from the beginning and am now reunited with her full time. If it wasn't for Safe Families for Children and the wonderful work they do, Olivia and I would have been separated by the system, landing her in foster care because I had no biological family to take her, and that was my greatest fear.

But by the grace of God, and Safe Families for Children, my fears didn't come true. It has been truly a blessing in my life, and I am so grateful to everyone who has been on my journey with me. My life is so much better because of all of you. Thank you so much. Because of you, I never lost hope.”

Referring Grandmother in Columbus:

“... God is a Great God. I have been contemplating sending u a thank u card. I've read so many cards but none expressed the true sense of what I wanted 2 say; that's why I've texted u several times 2 say thank you. My writing this letter 4 someone else 2 know how grateful I am 4 all u did is only fair bcuz u came into my life when I needed help with my grandsons most.

I'm grateful n I will remain grateful 4 as long as I live. U r such a loving n caring person. U put ur personal issues aside 4 others. Safe Families provided services 4 my grandsons that I couldn't have received elsewhere. I needed a safe God-fearing family who would give spiritual guidance 2 kids in need of direction; u fulfilled that need n I thank you again. My grandkids needed a safe environment 2 grow. I, as their grandmother was in no position 2 fulfill those needs they so much needed. My family n I will 4ever remain grateful. “

Referring Parent in Cincinnati:

“...a sweet, little 3 year old girl was hosted on a weekend basis for approximately a year. Stephanie is the mother; she had recently gained her sobriety and needed the weekend support, since she had no family nor friends she could trust to help her out.

Stephanie was doing great! She gained full time employment, moved to secure housing and was doing a wonderful job of parenting her daughter. But after she reported her new full time income to Job and Family Services, she lost her Medicaid coverage and could no longer pay for the Suboxone that was assisting her in her sobriety. Without the Suboxone, she relapsed and began using heroin again.

She called Safe Families in Cincinnati asking if we could Host for a longer period of time so she could go back to inpatient treatment and NOT be on any "substances" this time. She stated she doesn't want to be dependent on them so this never happens again. Safe Families and the county Children's Services Agency are working in partnership on this situation. Children's Services did open a case, but since Safe Families is able to Host her daughter, they did not need to get the court involved. A safety plan was put in place, and the mother retained custody of her child. Therefore, this little girl did NOT need to go into a Foster Care home.

Stephanie is doing very well and has, once again, gained a full- time job and secure housing. She is scheduled to graduate from her in-patient rehabilitation program in early April, and will then begin the reunification process. Mother and daughter will be reunified, in collaboration with Safe Families and Children's Services.

And as an added bonus, this mother and daughter have built trusted relationships with four (4!) different Host Families, all of whom care about mom and her daughter, and will be there to support her in raising her child for the long run. God is so good! “

Referring parents in Ohio:

“Warning: long, sappy post coming...so, 1 year ago today was the worst day of my life. On this day 1 year ago, Steve and I made the hardest decision of our lives. We put the girls in a temporary home (Safe Families) program. However, considering the situation we were in, it was the right choice. It was the longest 5 months of my life, but through hard work and saving money, we did what we had to to get them back.

I am especially thankful that we did because we would not have the relationship/friendship with the host family that we have now, the girls love them and their families. And special thanks to Lori Moyer Neff, without her I don't think I would have ever gotten through those 5 months. Also, without the help of the Safe Families program, I would not have the wonderful knowledge and guidance of the church that sponsors them. And lastly, Safe Families has taught me so much about myself, and the girls it is just amazing to see how much they have come and grown. So, thank you everyone for your love and support over the last year, even after we got the girls back.”