



Safe Children, Stable Families, Supportive Communities

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Senate Health and Human Services Committee
Interested Party Testimony, SB6
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Good morning Chair Burke, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Antonio, 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. We accept that we're in the minority with that opinion, however, given the interest and support for this bill.

We do think it's important 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. The Senator has been diligent in reaching out, convening conversations among the Judicial Conference, Safe Families, and PCSAO, listening, and crafting a compromise—the bill you are now considering. Senators Coley and Hottinger have brought forward a bill that is narrower in scope compared to the earliest version.

SB6 focuses on the primary stated concern of host family programs that parents who voluntarily place their child with a host family should not face negative consequences for that decision. That is why the bill includes provisions clarifying that the presumption of child abandonment is rebuttable if a child is hosted under a host family in accordance with this legislation (Sec. 2151.903) and preventing a public children services agency from filing a complaint in juvenile court because a child is hosted by a host family, unless other factors warrant such a filing (Sec. 2151.902).

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.

Host family programs are private, voluntary programs that do not operate with these rules, regulations, and accountability. As host family programs grow, it will be important that 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.

We thank Senator Coley, and now Senator Hottinger, for working with us and other stakeholders on this legislation. In its current form, it has answered our main concerns. I am available to answer any questions.

