

Good afternoon Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chair Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski and members of the civil justice committee. Thank you for the opportunity to stand before you today in support of House Bill 289. My name is Cyndi Swafford and I am from Dayton, in Montgomery County. In our 14 years of fostering children, my husband and I have taken some part in raising 26 children through the Ohio Foster care system. Of these children only 2 were reunified with a primary parent. There are a few that I'm unsure of the long term permanency outcomes but of those I know, another 8 were placed in kinship care, 10 have been adopted, 3 of those are my own children now. I am currently caring for several whose future permanency plans are yet undetermined.

I stand here today with hope, because this bill is in motion and someone is listening. However, the last number of years has conditioned me to reserve excitement because the list of needed changes is long.

In my years as a foster parent, I have seen children moved from good stable homes where they were well attached and thriving after sometimes 2 years only to be placed with distant family or loosely connect "relatives." One case I'd love to share with you, but I can't discuss details on a public platform because after nearly 5 year the child still does not closure or permanency. He was already disrupted from a foster home after 2 years of love and attachment but today his future is still not secure.

House Bill 289 stands to support Child Welfare. I think it is important today that we acknowledge first that children's rights must become a priority. In Ohio, far too often what was in the best interest of children has taken a back seat to parental rights.

Some of the greatest joys of my life have come from watching reunification work and being able to support moms and dads as they have overcome the hurdles that caused CPS involvement. I am not anti reunification. Sometimes it is absolutely what a child needs and deserves. But far too often, I've watched children suffer secondary trauma and major culture shock as they have been disrupted from stability and support to be reintroduced, and sometimes introduced for the first time into relative homes with little or no connection. House Bill 289 begins to offer hope of stability and permanency for children who are well adjusted and thriving in their foster homes in a more appropriate time frame than has previously been allowed.

As a foster parent, I get the primary front row seat to the lives of the children in my home, but repeatedly I have been the least heard voice in the major decisions about their lives. It's a big part of why foster parents feel we are fighting the system. This is CHILD WELFARE. If it is about the child, then we should be fighting the same battle. We should be linking arms for our children's futures, not standing on opposite sides of a battle field. House Bill 289 seeks to close the gap that has separated the primary caregiver for a foster child and the legally recognized voice for that child.

This is good start but there a long way to go in Ohio! This Bill speaks to diligent searches for children, but there needs to be more details and guidance on who that involves. And when caseworkers and agencies as a whole fail there must be a remedy. House Bill 289 is a good start, but we have a long road ahead. I'm anxious to see real change in Ohio's Child Welfare system. I'm anxious to see our children be a priority because our children are our future and the quality of their lives is at stake!

I've not walked away from this system, though I personally have suffered tremendous loss as a result of its shortcomings and I've watched many children suffer too. No child in this system has the ability walk

away so I won't either. I make myself available, I want to link arms and build a system of child welfare in Ohio that truly seeks to protect our children!

Thank you for believing that better is possible!