

Good morning Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chair Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski, and members of the Civil Justice Committee! I am so excited to provide written testimony on behalf of House Bill 289! House Bill 289 seeks to update foster care law in Ohio which will increase stability for the children in the foster care system. House Bill 289 will also ensure that the child's welfare comes first, as a priority. On this testimony, I would like to remain anonymous (as we currently have an active-foster-license, and an open-case placement in our home). If you would like to personally connect with me for more information, please contact Representative McClain and he can share my contact information with you.

Foster is defined as: to encourage or promote the development of, as well as: to give parental care to. We became a licensed foster home in 2017. In taking in a large sibling set from our county, we quickly became aware of many issues and instabilities with the foster care system in Ohio.

We were never given the opportunity to be heard in court. We were never able to "update the court about the child in the caregiver's care, express concerns to the court that relate to the child, ask questions about any aspect of the child's case, and file reports and letters to the court as part of the child's case record" (Juvenile Court Participation in HB 289).

The older kids in our care had witnessed the murder of one of their grandparents, and had many diagnoses related to watching that murder. By not allowing us in the court room, the judge was never able to hear how visits were going, that the youngest two children (toddlers) were coming back from visits (with the one biological parent who was let out of prison early) with lash-marks, bloody abrasions, and bruises. Many counselors, doctors, and other professionals were aware of these events- but the caseworker did not want this information presented to the judge- because it would hinder the goal of "reunification with a biological parent." The older siblings (who refused to go to visits) were adamant they would not return home with biological parent, because they knew what she was capable of. At one point, the older kids told us (foster parents) and their counselors and caseworker that they would commit suicide if they were reunited with biological parent(s). The supervisor looked at us and said, "as long as they commit suicide after our reunification box is checked, it doesn't matter." So, we were not allowed to talk to the judge and share our concerns about the safety of the children. The worker actually changed the placement of the children, and tried lots of mental and emotional abuse on them after the move- so they would be reunited, and he could meet his "goal." The worker also cancelled all witnesses and professionals who were supposed to present in court. Kids in care need stability. Kids in care need to be able to open-up when they feel safe. Kids in care need a voice. Kids in care need advocates. Kids in care need good foster families.

At one point, about 12 months in the case, a distant aunt and uncle claimed to want the children placed with them. The children only had one memory of this biological family, and it was in reference to how drunk they were the one time they went to their house. In House Bill 289, after 9 months of placement, foster families would be considered "kin," and granted equal status for placement as non-relatives, as they would as a biological family. After 12 months, it would have been so traumatic for the children to be moved to strangers that they only ever had one memory of, and the memory was negative.

The National Council for Adoption found that more than half of foster parents quit fostering within their first year. Do you wonder why, yet? How can we have these children in our homes, help them talk and work through their trauma, and have them open-up about such serious events- all to allow them to be put in situations that are not safe, healthy, or in the best interest of the children? Had we been given the opportunity to talk during court and present what was really happening- I am confident the judge would have made different decisions. Even if we still worked reunification, it would have/could have been done safely and appropriately.

In 2018, the National Council for Adoption reported that when trained foster parents continue to foster: children have a more stable foster care experience, there are improved outcomes for kids, and there is a substantial savings of fiscal dollars. By giving foster parents the opportunity to be present in court, as well as to present in court- I am confident we can start retaining more foster families. I urge you to support House Bill 289, and help us help children in care!

Thank you!

K.S.