

Dear Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee.

I am Rebecca Masterson, and I am Chief Counsel of Gen Justice, a non-profit wholly dedicated to repairing the broken child protection system and improving outcomes for foster children nationwide. Since Gen Justice was founded a little over 4 years ago, we have passed numerous bipartisan reforms in 4 states. I am thrilled and honored to be offering testimony here in Ohio in support of H 289 brought by Representative McClain.

One of the very first issues Gen Justice addressed in Arizona, our home state, was placement stability for foster children and why children were consistently ripped from loving and adoptive foster placements into the homes of strangers after one, two, even three and more years. Research is unequivocal that such moves are damaging to children.

We quickly found that the majority of children were being moved into the homes of relatives, which aligns with federal law. Whenever possible, children should absolutely be placed with willing and able biological relatives.

But what we also found was that state child welfare agencies were not searching for a child's relatives at the onset of the child's case. In fact, often agencies aren't searching relatives for a child until that child is on the cusp of adoption and has lived in one home since birth for years.

It's a horrible practice, unfair to the relatives and foster parents and downright devastating to the children.

H 289 is a common-sense solution. This bill requires PCSA or PCPA to conduct a diligent search for a child's relatives within 30 days of the child entering foster care. This requirement and timeframe echo federal law exactly. In other words, if a comprehensive relative search is not being conducted within 30 days, Ohio is in violation of federal mandates and risks losing federal funding.

Additionally, this bill adds an oversight mechanism and requires that the relative search be provided to the judge in the child's court case. This is imperative to ensure compliance. This piece makes sure that if a safe and appropriate relative is out there who can care for a child, this relative is found and the child is placed with the relative as soon as possible.

The second portion protects a child's stability by allowing foster caregivers to essentially be considered as a relative or kinship placement if the child has been in the home for 9 months. Staying in this long-term home, often the only family a child has ever known, is

presumed to be in the best interests of the child and allows the court the option of keeping a child in a stable foster family.

This bill was enacted in Arizona, Gen Justice's home state, four years ago with only one dissenting vote and has been very successful. Georgia and Louisiana also enacted this law, both unanimously.

Thank you for your time. Again, it is a privilege to provide testimony to this Committee.