

To Representative Hudson, Vice Chair Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski, and to the Ohio House Civil Justice Committee,

I would like to thank you all for allowing me to give proponent testimony on a bill as important as House Bill 289. It is my hope that bills like HB 289, we can start mending a very broken foster care system by recognizing the magnitude of the importance for stability and permanency for children who have suffered trauma.

Children in foster care have been put there for severe abuse and neglect. In Williams County, Fulton County, and Lucas County, I can say with the utmost certainty that these situations have to be so dangerous that they may result in either severe bodily harm or death of the child. It is extremely hard for child protective services to bridge the gap between a safety plan and having to remove a child from the home of their biological parents. Once a child has entered the foster care system, not only have they suffered at the hands of their own parents, but they have also suffered the loss of the only life they have ever known. It is imperative to the development of the child for them to be loved and cared for in a stable environment where they can trust and love their adult caregivers as soon as possible. The statistics for former foster children are damning evidence of the fact that children who are not able to form an attachment to an adult caregiver who they consider family (blood-related or not) are not likely to become productive members of society. The only hope for these children is to get into the loving arms of people who will provide them a forever home. While the best option is to be reunited with their biological parents, we see time and time again, and all throughout the state, that reunification is often not possible. Once a child enters the system, the number one goal should be to get them out as quickly as possible. If the children cannot be returned to birth parents, then family members need to step forward immediately so the child can begin to develop a new normal. We cannot allow these children to remain in foster care for years and allow them to become attached to their foster parents, who are often depending on the child's age the only parents they have ever known only to have a distant relative pull them out of a stable, loving home when they are eligible for adoption. The counties often do not terminate parental rights for years after the child has been in foster care. These relatives need to take responsibility for their kin the moment they are notified and offered the opportunity to intervene.

This bill gives notification time constraints for finding relatives and allowing them to accept responsibility and care for the children in their family. It also allows a child the opportunity to remain in a loving foster home where they have often been cared for for years if those relatives do not assume responsibility for those children in a timely manner. I would like to share my first and only experience with taking on a foster care sibling group placement.

My husband and I accepted a sibling group of three children, each under the age of five years of age, in the spring of 2019. By the time these children had arrived in our care, they had been through at least 3-4 different kinship care placement attempts. We were the second foster home they had been placed in. According to the social worker, we would be eligible to adopt all three of the children because the county was moving for permanent custody. What we were not told until three weeks after having the children in our care is that they had recently been DNA tested and their fathers had been found. Two of the children would eventually be reunited with their biological fathers. However, one of the children's biological fathers was serving a long-term prison sentence, and they would have to see if they could find other distant relatives to take the third child. Because of the alleged sexual and physical abuse these children experienced in kinship placements, after their initial foster care placement had occurred due to

their mother's drug use and neglect, these children were extremely combative. They acted out sexually, often caused themselves and others physical bodily harm, threw temper tantrums that often destroyed property, and struggled to sleep through the night. Potty training was nearly impossible. These behaviors, along with other medical conditions that we were unaware of them having when taking placement, were the reasons that we as parents of four other children of our own had to disrupt placement. The foster parent who picked up the children from out home to provide them with care for the remainder of their time in foster care told us that she had had the children in her home when they were in foster care before. They were in foster care for a total of nine months and, though they were having behavioral issues initially, they developed a routine and had seemed to adapt well in the care of their foster family. When briefing the new foster mom on the current behavioral issues, she was not surprised. Being a seasoned foster parent, she noted that children who re-enter foster care are worse off than the first time they entered care. Every placement of a child into a new environment is traumatic. It makes it extremely hard for the child to trust their surroundings and attach to the people who are caring for them because they have no idea when they will be ripped out of loving arms. Their situation can change at any moment. The three year old foster child that we cared for asked us every night where he was going to be in the morning. We have to do better for children like these. The children of our State deserve better.

This bill recognizes that family isn't always blood. Taking a child from a stable environment where they are happy and loved to give preference to relatives who should have assumed responsibility for their kin the moment the biological parents could not cannot take precedence over what's best for the child. House Bill 289 is a huge step in recognizing that stability and permanency need to be the most important goal for children who enter foster care. We have spoken to social workers, CASA workers, and foster parents throughout the state. We have discussed these matters with law enforcement agencies and former foster children. Due to our involvement in reforming foster care and adoption in the State of Ohio, we have had the opportunity to discuss this bill and have found that no one disagrees with the contents of this proposed legislation. However, many are unable to testify because of fear that they will be retaliated against if they speak out on the matter. For some, it may jeopardize their ability to either work in the social work field or adopt foster children that are currently eligible for adoption in their homes. Ageing out of the system cannot be an option for these children. My family and I personally mentored a seventeen year old, who after six months of ageing out of the system that she was in for 8 years, died on the streets of Lima, OH. She had been placed in more than 30 foster homes and kinship placements during her time in care. As a result, she was unable to attach to nor accept help or love from anyone. Her death is still pending investigation, but what we do know is that she was out late at night in an altercation with a boyfriend and was hit by an oncoming car in the street where she succumbed to her injuries. We cannot help but wonder what would have happened if she was adopted by a stable family at the age of nine years old when she first entered foster care. We wonder what could have been in this scenario.

But we do not have to wonder what will be if our state continues to push in a positive direction for the foster children of Ohio. Legislation like House Bill 289 is a step in the right direction to giving foster children the permanency and stability that they need to flourish and thrive during their crucial developmental years. I fully support this bill, and ask that this committee, along with the House of Representatives, continue to push for legislation that gives these children the possibility of gaining a forever family.

Shirley Wagner