

## PROPONENT TESTIMONY - HB508

### TESTIMONY OF Dr. Chris Knoester

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### CIVIL JUSTICE COMMITTEE

### OHIO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, 134TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chair Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski and members of the House Civil Justice Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on HB508.

My name is Chris Knoester and I'm a professor of sociology here at The Ohio State University, a resident of Upper Arlington, and a father of three teenagers.

**This bill is important to Ohioans, and society, because it recognizes and supports involved fathering and the effects and responsibilities that come along with it.**<sup>1-5</sup> As a family sociologist for well over 20 years, I have specialized in studying families, gender, and particularly the effects of fatherhood on men's lives.<sup>2-5</sup> Relatedly, I have also spent much of the past eight years specifically studying paternity leave-taking and its effects on men, their co-parents, and their children.<sup>6-9</sup> This is especially relevant because paternity leave attitudes, supports, behaviors, and effects overwhelmingly concern shared parenting issues. I conduct my research by focusing on specific topics of interest, reading up on the best available research on the topic, formulating my own ideas and expectations about what is going on, and then using large national surveys of thousands of people to track and report what actually happens to them over time.

**First, I want to emphasize the social construction of (shared) parenting, gender, and notions of the best interest of the child.** Part of a sociological perspective, a social science that emphasizes the presence and effects of social forces, is recognizing that parenting is learned behavior—and one does not have to be a woman to learn this behavior. Men can be excellent parents—and increasingly are yearning to be so and demonstrating that they commonly are. Yet, gender is something that we have mutually constructed to have extraordinary meaning and effects in society; in fact, the meaning and effects go way beyond any that result purely from biological differences associated with sex categories. Consequently, gender profoundly affects our thoughts, behaviors aspirations, interests, interactions, identities—and our assumptions about it have become embedded in many of our social institutions—

such as workplaces, families, and legal systems. But, it is largely based on myths and we are all unfairly affected by it at different times and places. Again, increasingly, people are recognizing some of the shortcomings of how we “do” gender in society and are challenging and changing many of those things—including how we allocate and take on parenting responsibilities. Finally, nevertheless, despite remarkable increases in involved fathering preferences, aspirations, and behaviors in recent decades—and increased recognition and understanding of gender, for the most part, as not automatically instilling people with special abilities, such as in parenting—too many laws, institutional practices, and prejudices assume that women are, and should be, the overwhelming and superior caregivers to children. Increased societal awareness of the shortcomings of how we do gender in society, and research evidence, suggests that this should change.<sup>1-9</sup>

**In fact, fathers offer valuable parenting contributions** that commonly go beyond breadwinning. Increasingly, they want to become more engaged parents and their partners want them to be more involved, too. Moreover, involved fathering has been continually shown to positively affect children’s lives, on average. Furthermore, my research has highlighted that meeting fathering expectations and engaging in more involved fathering seems to have positive effects on men’s own lives, too. They report higher levels of well-being when they engage in such behaviors, for example. They also tend to report higher quality romantic and co-parenting relationships, which suggests that mothers appreciate responsible and more involved fathering—and benefit from it, too. Some of my recent research even suggests that women are more supportive of paid paternity leave than are men, in fact!<sup>1-9</sup>

In closing, **my reading of the research on shared parenting suggests that children do at least as well, and typically better, in shared parenting arrangements. However, fathers need more support and encouragement in order to be allowed to be involved fathers and to continually aspire to be such fathers.** A shared equal parenting assumption works to better institutionalize that support and encouragement and further recognize the parental rights of parents of different genders. As I’ve seen in my research on paternity leave-taking and on the effects of fatherhood on men’s lives, men need more support in society in order to be the best parents that they can be; all too frequently, they disengage or are prevented from being involved fathers when they do not receive enough support and encouragement. But, they can be excellent parents when they are given the opportunity, offered support, and make the requisite commitments to be great parents.<sup>1-9</sup>

**This bill can make an essential difference in supporting and encouraging involved fathering, recognizing parental rights and responsibilities for all parents, and improving child—and other family members’—outcomes.**

As a primary parent for our three children over the course of their lives, and a parent with exceptional responsibilities because of the special needs of our daughter, this is also a personal issue for me—despite having been married for over 20 years and continually living with my wife and all of our children. It is upsetting to think about the uncertainty and risks that befall parents who need to negotiate, or have decided, parenting arrangements from not living together—and potentially lose access to appropriately nurturing parent-child relationships. Throughout society, involved fathering needs to have better support and encouragement and a shared equal parenting assumption is an essential part of this.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you for your attention and initiatives on this important matter in the form of HB 508. I would be happy to answer any questions.

## REFERENCES

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