

To Chairman Manchester, Vice Chairman Cutrona, Ranking Member Liston, and Members of the Families, Aging, and Human Services Committee:

Our names are Adam and Shirley Wagner. We reside in West Unity and hail from District 81 in Northwest Ohio. As adoptive parents, child mentors and advocates, and former foster parents, we are passionate about legislation that will lift the financial burdens of families that have been placed in kinship placement and other third-party scenarios. We want to thank you for the opportunity to present our written testimony to you in support of House Bill 83.

We would like to begin with a story from Shirley's childhood. Shirley ran away from home at the age of 16 after reporting several instances of abuse and neglect that she endured while living in her mother's home to both the local police department and to her therapist. A social worker then contacted her mother and explained that following an investigation, the mother would be charged with abuse and neglect. However, if the mother signed over power of attorney to Shirley's older sister, an investigation would not be necessary. Her mother signed over the power of attorney rights to Shirley's older sister, and Shirley went to reside at her sister's home. However, Shirley's sister was living on a limited income with two children of her own, and could barely make ends meet to financially support her own family. The added burden of another mouth to feed forced Shirley to have to maintain full time third shift employment while attending high school during the day. Because of the existing financial strains on Shirley's older sister, she was not able to afford to obtain legal custody or guardianship of Shirley. As a result, never once during this time was Shirley's mother or father ever required to pay any financial support to the older sister for bringing Shirley into her home and providing for her. Shirley could not help but feel like a burden to her older sister.

As supporters of children and families in need in our county, we see such scenarios day in and day out. We believe that House Bill 83 is one of the ways that the State of Ohio can assist families who would like to help their relatives through difficult times, while also holding biological parents financially responsible for their children. This legislation is long overdue.

Shirley recently met with Representative Jim Hoops from District 81, the director of the Williams County Department of Job and Family Services, and the supervisor of Child Protective Services to discuss their newly founded licensing program for foster parents. Not only were they attempting to advertise their ability to license foster parents in our county, they were also trying to build family trees to find distant relatives that would be able to house the children in hopes that they would be open to a kinship placement scenario. We know from personal experience that kinship placements are not possible for many children that have relatives with financial limitations. This was one of the reasons why our oldest adopted daughter ended up at our doorstep; the financial burdens of a kinship placement were too strenuous for any of her close or distant relatives to afford.

In a divorce scenario where one parent receives residential custody, the other biological parent is typically required to pay child support by court order. If at any time that the non-residential parent fails to pay child support, they can be penalized. If this is the case, then parents who lose custody of their children should equally be held to the same standard and have to provide child support to a relative, or other third party, who is taking on the financial responsibility for their child. This standard needs to be applied equally across the board to ensure that all third party caregivers receive the support needed to care for the children.

As foster parents, we believe this bill additionally supports long-term reunification of foster children with their biological parent(s). It is often the case that parents who lose custody of their children struggle to maintain a basic budget. If these parents go months or years without being financially responsible for their child, they will feel immediate financial impact if or when those children are returned to them. If they were providing some kind of support while the child was in care, they would be used to budgeting support for that child when they are eventually reunified. Once reunification happens, the requirement to pay for support would be eliminated and the money once paid in support could now be used for the direct care of the child. We believe that this bill will better set parents up for success and make the reunification process more financially seamless for biological parents who typically struggle with budgeting.

When Shirley was presented with information about this bill, she researched the matter and spoke to people that it would directly impact. Our fellow citizens all agree - child support should follow the child and that parents that do not have residential custody of children should pay support for them. This could alleviate the financial burden on kinship placements and help stunt the ever growing number of children in the state of Ohio entering the foster care system. We support the notion that third-party caretakers should have the legal means by which to request and obtain financial support. We agree with the idea that child support should follow the child to whichever household they reside in. Because of this, we, along with scores of our fellow citizens, are in full support of House Bill 83.

Sincerely,

Adam & Shirley Wagner