



Testimony on HB 281
Erich Bittner, Director of Government Relations
Ohio Association of County Boards of DD
5/25/21

Chair Lipps, Vice Chair Holmes, Ranking Member Russo, and members of the House Health Committee;

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of House Bill 281. The Ohio Revised Code currently uses a number of outdated or demeaning terms to refer to people with various types of disabilities. The General Assembly has worked in the past to update many of these terms. Perhaps the most notable effort was the attempt to eliminate the term “mental retardation” from the official state lexicon. This was accomplished primarily through the passage of Senate Bill 79 in the 128th GA, which renamed many of our state and county level agencies, and House Bill 158 in the 131st GA, which struck the term from most other sections of the revised code. The use of such anachronistic and offensive terminology to refer to people with disabilities serves only to further stigmatize, marginalize, and traumatize Ohioans who already face increased challenges and, in many cases, routine discrimination. The Ohio Association of County Boards of DD supported those historic changes and we applaud Representatives Jarrells and Young for bringing forward this new bill to address the numerous remaining provisions of the revised code which persist in the use of similarly problematic terminology.

In preparing to introduce this legislation, the sponsors gathered input from a diverse coalition of interested parties representing the broadest possible cross-section of the disability and mental health communities. OACB participated in that process, and we fully support the resulting legislation. In addition to replacing terms like “defect” and “handicapped” that explicitly label people with disabilities as being “less than” people who do not share their particular condition or diagnosis, HB 281 embraces a linguistic philosophy known as “people-first language.” This change confronts the dehumanizing effects of disability-based stereotypes by making the subject’s condition secondary to their existence as a person.

HB 281 recognizes the importance of language in shaping our perceptions of the world. Emphasizing a person’s humanity and individuality rather than defining them solely by a specific characteristic fosters understanding and inclusion, and the use of people-first language in statute will promote more equitable access to the benefits of our laws and civil society. We are grateful for your consideration of this worthwhile measure, and we encourage its speedy adoption.

Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions at this time.