



Ohio Children's Alliance

Leading change for child and family service providers

March 4, 2021

Ohio Children's Alliance Testimony on HB 110

Chairman Roemer, Ranking Member West, and Members of the Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony today regarding House Bill 110, the Main Operating Budget bill for FY 2022-2023.

My name is Mark Mecum; I am the CEO of the Ohio Children's Alliance. Founded in 1973 as Ohio's first statewide child advocacy organization, the Ohio Children's Alliance provides leadership for Ohio's children, families, and community agencies. Our membership is composed of over 80 agencies throughout Ohio that provide foster care and behavioral health services to over 100,000 children and family members each year.

The agencies that comprise the Ohio Children's Alliance are essential to the communities they serve, especially during this uncertain time. They strengthen families with evidence-based programming, keep kids safe in foster care, and facilitate adoption and permanency. They are also preparing Ohio's next class of foster care alumni for bright futures through the *Bridges* program which we administer through a partnership with the Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS). Collectively, we offer a unique and important view of HB 110.

We are grateful and proud of many of the proposed investments in children services in the Executive budget, and we applaud this administration's ability to put forward a balanced budget that remains committed to kids and families. Particularly, the proposed investments in child, family, and community protective services line items are essential. This funding equips our child protection system to keep pace with the historic influx of children entering foster care, enhance our efforts to strengthen families and prevent kids from entering foster care in the first place, and to implement the federal Family First Prevention Services Act, the largest national child welfare reform effort of my lifetime.

Our recommendations for changes in the HB 110 are focused on two strategic issues facing our communities: 1) kinship care financing and 2) accreditation of community child welfare agencies.

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Kinship Care Financing

The proposed budget for ODJFS includes funding for Ohio’s brand new Kinship Support Program (KSP). The KSP program aims to boost services for 4,000 children in child protective services custody who are cared for by 2,600¹ kinship caregivers. The KSP program was established on December 29, 2020 with the passage of Senate Bill 310. The legislation provides a temporary subsidy to the eligible kinship families and lays the groundwork for them to receive even more support by community agencies funded through the federal Title IV-E Foster Care Program. The KSP program represents a significant shift in our child welfare system by empowering families to care for their own kin, instead of foster parents.

In order for the new KSP program to be successful, we encourage the Legislature to maintain the proposed state funding for the temporary subsidies in the Executive Budget. Further, we recommend that the state’s match obligation of Title IV-E expenditures for these kinship families be provided by ODJFS instead of county child protective services agencies. If a new state GRF fund is not established to fund Ohio’s matching requirements, we worry that the expenses of the program will be funded out of dollars needed at the local county level for child protection.

Accreditation of Community Child Welfare Agencies

While Ohioans struggle to cope with the impacts of COVID-19, our community child welfare agencies have responded with heroics. Every day, these essential workers are providing services to children and families in need – but the demand for services is far out-pacing Ohio’s supply. While prevention programs and emphasis on kinship families are important pieces of the puzzle, we also need solutions for the 15,000 children served in this overwhelmed system.

We recommend that the Legislature consider strategies that promote higher quality of services provided by community agencies, while also aligning the resources used by state government to license, monitor, and regulate the agencies. It was in this spirit that the General Assembly passed legislation over 15 years ago to permit state licensing agencies to enact “deemed status” arrangements with their licensed community agencies. This is a process through which community child welfare and mental health agencies that achieve national accreditation could be recognized by their state licensing agency as complying with the state licensing regulations that overlap with their accreditation. While the arrangement has been permitted, it has not been utilized to its full potential, especially for child welfare agencies.

¹ <https://governor.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/governor/media/news-and-media/executive-order-12302020>

Ensuring child welfare agencies have access to a deemed status arrangement would achieve a more streamlined and efficient system for the more than 100 licensed child welfare agencies across the state. This opportunity is even more critical today due to a new federal law, the Family First Prevention Services Act, which requires child welfare agencies to possess national accreditation. Ensuring Ohio's nationally accredited child welfare agencies have access to a deemed status arrangement will promote the concept of accreditation and will narrow redundant state regulatory activities, ultimately freeing up government resources.

In closing, we want to stress how thankful and appreciate we are that the proposed Executive budget includes vital funding and policies that support Ohio's children and families. Maintaining investment in children services and prevention as well as removing regulatory barriers to direct services is critical.

I also wanted to add that as an alliance of child welfare and behavioral health agencies, I submitted additional written testimony to the committee yesterday about the behavioral health provisions of the budget bill, which I encourage you to read.

Chairman Roemer, Ranking Member West, and Members of the Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you,

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