

The Ohio Senate

Senate Health Committee
Senator Stephen Huffman, Chair

HOUSE BILL 110
TESTIMONY
May 6, 2021

Chairman Huffman, Vice Chairman Antani, Ranking Member Antonio, and Members of the Ohio Senate Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony asking you to consider including an amendment to House Bill 110 to create the Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) Fund to appropriate \$2.6M annually, through the Ohio Attorney General's Office of Victim Services in the state budget.

My name is Libby Nicholson, and I am the director of CARE House Children's Advocacy Center and a founding member of the Ohio Network of Children's Advocacy Centers. CARE House is located on the campus of Dayton Children's Hospital and we serve more than 1,000 children annually. Our center is home to the Montgomery County multi-disciplinary team responding to child abuse allegations, and includes the Dayton Police Department, Montgomery County Children Services, Montgomery County Prosecutor's Office, Dayton Children's Hospital and Montgomery County Sheriff's Department.

As you may know, Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs) are accredited collaborative sites for a comprehensive, multidisciplinary response to child abuse cases. Ohio is home to 37 accredited and developing centers across the state and Ohio's CACs served nearly 12,000 abused children last year in partnership with local law enforcement departments, prosecutors, and children's services agencies.

Not only are CAC's best practice to help kids heal, but they are also effective and efficient. The collaborative investigations within CACs can save as much as 36% over the cost of traditional investigations. In addition, the research shows that the use of the CAC multidisciplinary teams has resulted in increased successful prosecutions of child abuse perpetrators, and defendants convicted of sex crimes against children were sentenced to longer prison terms when they had been investigated via the CAC-multidisciplinary model. All 50 states, including Ohio have passed legislation requiring government agencies to collaborate on cases of child abuse and CACs are the key component to ensuring ongoing and effective collaboration.

Here in Ohio, Children's Advocacy Centers like CARE House have not received any state funding and have mostly relied on funding through the federal Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funds. However, during the past three years as child abuse cases have increased, these funds for the Ohio CACs have decreased more than **70%**, including the additional **34% reduction** in VOCA funding starting October 2021.

Those cuts and the increasing cases are the reason we are here today asking for assistance so this vital work can continue by including an amendment in House Bill 110 which creates appropriations for the next state budget.

In the Dayton region, we are fortunate to have accredited child advocacy centers in Montgomery, Greene and Warren Counties serving as a single site for a comprehensive, multidisciplinary response to child abuse cases. Sadly, we are seeing the increased abuse of children as a result of the pandemic. The disruption and stress caused by mounting unemployment, school closures, and stay-at-home orders have increased the risk for child abuse and family violence. Far too many children have been stuck at home with their abusers, without the safety net of schools and other mandated

reporters. Now as kids go back to school and to health care providers, we are seeing these cases skyrocket, and our state needs CACs more than ever. For CACs, likely ones in more under-resourced areas of the state, this next VOCA funding cut will mean the difference between closing or keeping their doors open for abused children in need of CAC services.

That is why I am here asking that you consider including an amendment to fund Children's Advocacy Centers in House Bill 110 so that all Ohio kids have access to the best care and support, when the unthinkable happens.

It is important to note the support this amendment from the Ohio Prosecuting Attorney's Association, the Public Children Services Association of Ohio, the Ohio Children's Alliance, the Buckeye State Sheriffs' Association, and the County Commissioner's Association of Ohio, as well as others.

Thank you, Chair, Vice Chair, Ranking Member, and members of the Senate Health Committee, for this opportunity to share my view on this important legislation. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

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