



Testimony in Support of SB 100
Senate Health Committee
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Graham Bowman, Ohio Poverty Law Center

Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, and Ranking Member Antonio,

My name is Graham Bowman and I am a staff attorney with the Ohio Poverty Law Center. Ohio Poverty Law Center’s mission is to reduce poverty and increase justice by protecting and expanding the legal rights of Ohioans living, working, and raising their families in poverty. Prior to my work with the Ohio Poverty Law Center I was a youth health attorney for the Law Project of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless where I assisted unaccompanied homeless youth access health services. Thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony in favor of SB 100.

We support SB 100 because it partially addresses a major barrier to accessing behavioral health services that is faced by minors who are living outside of the care of a parent or legal guardian. Ohio’s behavioral health consent law is significantly more restrictive than those in other midwest states and throughout the country. Most states provide mental health professionals the discretion to continue to see a minor without parental consent if, based on their professional judgement, there is good cause to do so. For example, if the minor’s safety would be at risk if their parents were notified or, if in the case of unaccompanied minors, their parent or guardian is unreachable, a health professional could provide care. Ohio’s current statute allows for no such professional discretion.

In 2019, the National Law Center on Homelessness Law Center released a comprehensive report “Alone Without a Home” that provided a state-by-state review of laws in 13 key issue areas that affect the lives of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.¹ The report found significant gaps in Ohio law regarding when and home unaccompanied minors may access key services like primary and physical health care.

Unaccompanied minors leave home for a variety of reasons, such as violence in the home, being forced to leave by a parent, or neglect. According to a 2016 survey by the Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine’s office, 53% of the youth interviewed reporting experiencing childhood physical abuse and 24% reported sexual abuse. Once they become homeless, minors are at extreme risk of

¹ <https://nlchp.org/alone-without-a-home-2019/>

further victimization and long-term estrangement from their families when they are unable to access services from trusted professionals with experience working with this population.

In that same Attorney General's office survey, none of the youth interviewed were currently in foster care and only 31% reported previously being in a foster setting. Of the youth interviewed, 52% of youth reported struggling with getting enough to eat, 38.8% struggled with getting medical care, and 43.8% struggled with finding a safe place to sleep. This survey is consistent with research conducted by the University of Chicago Chapin Hall, which is a national leader in studying the issue of homeless youth. Chapin Hall's 2017 "Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America" exposed a national youth homelessness crisis in which approximately 700,000 youth ages 13-17 experience homelessness every year. It is difficult to know how many unaccompanied homeless minors there are in Ohio, but we estimate the number is between 1,000 and 2,000.

Homeless youth struggling with these issues are easy victims for bad actors when they are unable to access services from professionals who are experienced with providing services to this high-needs population due to gaps in Ohio law and instead must rely on strangers to meet their basic needs. SB 100 would allow behavioral health providers some discretion to continue treating some of these minors who are the most desperate and help them towards a path of reuniting with family or other trusted adults and hopefully escape the dire circumstances they have found themselves in.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony and I am happy to provide additional information to members of the committee about this important issue.

Graham Bowman
Staff Attorney
Ohio Poverty Law Center
614-634-2356
Gbowman@ohiopovertylaw.org