



Children Have Options in Caring Environments

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CHOICES Testimony on Senate Bill 239

Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Member Antonio, and Members of the Senate Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer proponent testimony today regarding Senate Bill 239.

My name is Jane Anderson; I am the Executive Director of CHOICES Inc. CHOICES Inc. is a private, non-profit agency which was established in 1986. We provide foster care, independent living and mental health services to youth and families in Central and Southwest Ohio. CHOICES Inc. employs 40 staff and serves over 550 clients annually.

CHOICES Inc. is supportive of Senate Bill 239 because it will help us address crucial workforce issues in our foster care programs. Senate Bill 239 has two main components:

1) *Change to Home Assessor Requirements*

Currently, private agencies are required to hire licensed social workers to write home studies to license new foster parents. When looking on the Indeed job posting website, there are almost 2800 open positions for a licensed social worker in Ohio. This requirement to hire a licensed staff is unnecessary and cumbersome, specifically for private agencies like CHOICES. Under current rule, public/county agencies are not required to hire licensed social workers to complete the same tasks. They are able to hire staff with bachelor's degrees in related fields. CHOICES Inc. has to train licensed staff on the process of certifying foster parents in the same way we would have to train an unlicensed staff. Obtaining a bachelor's degree in social work and a subsequent license in social work does not provide any practical, real world experience and/or knowledge related to the licensing of a foster home.

Private agencies like CHOICES have to train our staff upon hire in the same way county agencies, who are able to hire unlicensed staff, train their new hires. Assessors, regardless if they possess a license in Social Work or not, are required to attend Tier I and Tier II training. Tier I and Tier II training is a series of trainings related to adoption, birth family rights, and cultural issues, facilitated by the Regional Training Centers. We believe this licensure requirement and burden

should be eliminated from the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services foster care rules.

CHOICES Inc. would like to expand the eligible pool of home assessors to include individuals who hold a bachelor's degree in certain human services fields. Some examples include, sociology, psychology; guidance and counseling; education; religious education; business administration; criminal justice; public administration; child-care administration; nursing; family studies; and any other human services field related to working with children and families.

2) Change to Professional Treatment Staff Requirements

The second provision in Senate Bill 239 would eliminate the requirement for private agencies to hire licensed individuals to meet the requirements of "Professional Treatment Staff." "Professional Treatment Staff" provide case management services to the foster youth who are placed in our foster homes. These staff meet with the foster families and youth to ensure the youth are well taken care of, are receiving the services they need, and to support the foster parents in meeting the needs of the youth.

The current rule lists the following degrees as meeting the requirements of "professional treatment staff" if the individual is employed by a *private* agency, not a public/county agency; a licensed social worker, a licensed independent social worker, a licensed professional counselor, a licensed professional clinical counselor, a counselor trainee, a licensed marriage and family therapist, a licensed independent marriage and family therapist, a certified chemical dependency counselor, a licensed medical doctor or doctor of osteopathy, a licensed psychologist, a master's level or registered nurse with responsibility for providing agency services for a child placed in a treatment foster home or a medically fragile foster home.

Even though this list may look exhaustive and comprehensive, I have worked in the field of Child Welfare in the State of Ohio for the past fifteen years and have never seen an independently licensed social worker, therapist, licensed doctor, psychologist, or a nurse employed as a case manager for foster youth, which leaves the licensed social worker as the only viable option to fill this position. This requirement severely limits CHOICES ability to find, hire, and train qualified staff due to the shortage of licensed individuals in the state. This in turn leads to unnecessarily long vacancies which places undue stress on the staff that are currently employed as case managers.

It is for these reasons outlined above, a shortage of licensed social workers in the State of Ohio, the ability of private agencies to adequately train staff to complete assessor and case management duties, and the unfair burden that is placed upon private agencies vs. our public counterparts that CHOICES Inc. is fully supportive of Senate Bill 239. Foster care is a vital, necessary service and every administrative

barrier should be removed to enable private agencies to adequately train and license foster homes as well as provide case management and support to those families.

Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Member Antonio, and Members of the Senate Health Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer questions from the committee at this time.

Thank you,

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