



# Ohio Children's Alliance

*Leading change for child and family service providers*

November 15, 2021

## Ohio Children's Alliance Proponent Testimony on SB 239

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

My name is Mark Mecum; I am the CEO of the Ohio Children's Alliance. Founded in 1973, the Ohio Children's Alliance provides leadership for Ohio's at-risk children, families, and community agencies. Our membership is made up of over 80 community agencies across Ohio providing foster care and behavioral health services to over 100,000 children and families each year.

In our state, there are grave workforce challenges facing the foster care and behavioral health systems today that require reconsideration of our state government's policies on the workforce. We believe that there is opportunity to widen the pool of professionals who can perform foster care services without jeopardizing quality or safety. Doing so requires a change in law. The legislation before you, SB 239, would do just that.

Today, there are simply not enough professionals available to perform treatment foster care case management or Home Study assessments. This has been a challenge for years but has only been exacerbated since the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, our child protection system is maintaining a very high caseload of children in its custody who are placed in foster care. A high caseload coupled with a workforce shortage causes a serious challenge that must be addressed. This legislation will be a powerful tool in addressing this challenge because it will permit otherwise qualified professionals to perform these important roles under close watch and supervision of their employers.

The bill widens state policy on who private sector foster care agencies can employ to support foster children and their caregivers in what is called "treatment foster homes". Treatment homes are basically foster homes that have extra training and support to address behavioral or medical

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treatment issues for foster children. The bill also widens policy on who can be employed as Home Study Assessors, who are the child welfare professionals that evaluate families interesting in becoming certified foster care or adoptive caregivers and ultimately produce a written Home Study Assessment.

Its application would cover all of Ohio's private sector foster care agencies – approximately 100 primarily nonprofit agencies – because existing law already provides public county agencies with significant flexibility.

Specifically this bill scales back the existing requirement that professionals performing either of the roles I described maintain a social work license. In place of that high standard, the bill expands the workforce requirement to also include individuals who possess bachelor's degrees in human services fields related to children and families, which mirrors the standard used in Ohio's community mental health sector.

If this bill is implemented, it will establish essential alignment in our human services workforce at a time when our sector needs any and all solutions. First, the bill aligns workforce requirements among all public or private child welfare agencies that provide these services which aligns accountability standards and fosters improved employment opportunities for professionals moving between public and private sector employment. Second, it aligns direct service workforce requirements among the child welfare and behavioral health sectors, which is critically important given that most "foster care agencies" are actually multi-service community agencies that provide foster care, behavioral health, and other supportive services. And third, it aligns workforce requirements with our neighboring states, such as Kentucky. This is important because Ohio is the headquarters of many foster care agencies that serve children in multiple states, such as Necco, National Youth Advocate Program, and SAFY.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the bill addresses Governor DeWine's Children Services Transformation recommendations. Those recommendations, which were informed by families, youth, and subject matter experts, includes in its [final report](#) goal to reduce state government red tape and allow children services agencies to do more work in the field. This legislation gets us closer to this goal in a significant way and directly responds to the needs of the families and providers that testified before the initiative's Advisory Counsel.

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*For more in-depth information on Home Assessor and Treatment Foster Care staff requirements and the positive impacts the legislation would have on our sector, please view the attached foster care workforce one-pagers.*

In summary, SB 239 will ensure that children can find safe and stable homes sooner, and will have the treatment support they need from qualified case managers. Our child welfare system needs to continue to adapt to meet the demand ahead of us. We commend Representatives Ray and Stephens for responding to the needs of children and foster families across the state. We fully support SB 239.

Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Member Antonio, and Members of the Senate Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony today regarding Senate Bill 239. Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Thank you.

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