



**Ohio Senate
Health Committee**

Proponent Testimony on Senate Bill 239

Presented by:

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Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Antonio, and members of the Senate Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 239.

My name is Jessica Parks, and I am the Ohio Regional Director for Foster Care at Necco. I am joined by Pam Priddy, the Chief Strategy Officer for Necco. Necco is a foster care, independent living, residential and behavioral health company founded in 1996. In addition, Necco provides services to young adults that have aged out of foster care and are transitioning into adulthood through independent living programs. While Necco is headquartered in Cincinnati, they also operate throughout all of Ohio, Georgia, West Virginia, and Kentucky. To date, Necco has built over 25,000 families and completed over 5,000 adoptions.

We also have a sixty (60) bed residential facility, The Necco Center, located in Pedro, Ohio in Lawrence County. The Necco Center provides foster care for boys ages 9-22 with an intellectual delay and a dual diagnosis. All total, Necco Ohio includes 400 dedicated employees, and serves over 250 foster families, nearly 400 foster youth, over 1,000 outpatient children and families, and nearly sixty (60) youth at The Necco Center at any given time. Necco is a member of the Ohio Children's Alliance, a statewide child advocacy organization, which is also supportive of Senate Bill 239.

Necco, as well as the other private and public foster care companies are experiencing critical workforce and staffing shortages that directly impact the number of foster homes we can open each month and strains our ability to provide timely services and treatment to children. We struggle to find and hire the staff to open foster homes and provide rehabilitation services, counseling, and other core services. Today, we have over 40 open positions in Ohio at Necco. One major factor contributing to our struggle to hire for these positions is that current law limits who Necco, as a private foster care agency, can hire as "home assessors" and "professional treatment staff". The changes in Senate Bill 239 will help us tremendously because it expands the individuals qualified to perform these jobs and creates parity with the requirements in law for those same staff employed by a public agency.

PROFESSIONAL TREATMENT STAFF

Professional treatment staff employed by both public and private foster care agencies do the same job providing rehabilitative services, home studies, clinical directions, and supervising treatment of children in specialized foster homes. However, the educational, licensure, and training requirements are different for staff hired at a private foster care agency, such as Necco, compared to a public foster care agency. The more restrictive requirements for private agencies puts Necco at a disadvantage when recruiting professional treatment staff. Senate Bill 239 removes the licensure requirement for individuals employed by private agencies and requires the same education requirements and employment experience as is required for individuals employed by public agencies. When Senate Bill 239 becomes law, both public and private





professional treatment staff will be subject to the same educational and/or experience requirements:

- Bachelor's degree in human-services related studies, or
- Bachelor's degree in any field & 2+ years in a human-services related occupation, or
- Associate's degree in human-services related studies or
- Employed for 5+ years in a human-services related occupation

HOME ASSESSORS

A home assessor employed by both public and private foster care agencies, again, do the same job which is to complete an assessment or home study of the applicant, the applicant's family, and the applicant's home environment to determine whether the home would be safe and appropriate for children in foster care. Again, the requirements are different for a home assessor employed by a private foster care agency as an individual must be licensed as a social worker, chemical dependency counselor, or other similar licensed individual. There is not a licensure requirement for home assessors employed by a public foster care agency. Senate Bill 239 expands the qualifications of home assessors to include individuals who hold a bachelor's degree certain human services fields including:

- 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.

Not only will this change help us hire more home assessors who we desperately need to be able to open more foster care agencies, it will also free up our licensed staff to spend more time performing duties associated with their licensure such as counseling and treatment.

The provisions contained in Senate Bill 239 will bring Ohio's requirements in line with surrounding states such as Pennsylvania, Kentucky, West Virginia, Indiana, and Michigan. Creating parity among not only private and public agencies, but also among our neighboring states, will help us compete for employees who often cross into a border state for a job.





Chairman Huffman and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of this important legislation. It is vital that we pass Senate Bill 239 quickly as Ohio continues to see a near record number of children entering foster care and foster care agencies are struggling to hire staff to fill vacant positions and keep up with demand.

I am happy to answer any questions.

