

**House Families, Aging, and Human Services Committee**  
**Angela Earley, MSSA, LISW-S**  
**Proponent Testimony on Substitute House Bill 4**  
**May 19, 2021**

Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Cutrona, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the House Families, Aging, and Human Services Committee, we thank you for this opportunity to proponent testimony on Substitute House Bill 4. I am Angela Earley, Executive Director of Chrysalis Family Solutions, adoptive parent of three special needs children, former foster parent, and kinship caregiver. I also provide training and consulting with child serving agencies throughout the state with a focus on how trauma and adversity impact neurodevelopment and how to best treat and serve impacted children and families. My husband and I also had the honor of serving on the Children's Services Advisory Council, representing kinship caregivers.

My personal and professional roles and experiences have provided many opportunities for learning and experiencing the challenges faced in our current child welfare system. Hearing the voices of many more constituents across the state through our work on the Council, provided the opportunity to process these challenges, identify potential solutions, and to take part in the creation of the 37 recommendations to the Governor for key reform priorities for the system. One of these critical recommendations is the creation of a state-level ombudsperson. This person would investigate and resolve concerns made by, or on behalf of, children and families involved with public children's services agencies and private provider agencies that administer or oversee foster care and other placements for the children's services system.

All of these stories exemplify the need for this appointed position to be an impartial, independent entity. This will allow a fair, confidential investigation to occur. It will also be critically necessary that this individual have the authority to bring full resolution to an investigation. Otherwise, we have added an ineffective position that increases the budget but doesn't achieve the Counsel's desired outcome. While most child serving staff act in the best interests of children and families in care, mistakes are made and unnecessary extensions of time are permitted with no unbiased oversight. If children or families have a grievance, there is rarely a third party involved. These cases are almost always reviewed by the agency staff, which leads to withheld justified complaints for fear of retaliation and/or biased protection of the agency or agency staff. There is currently no mechanism for impartial representation.

There are many examples of hardships for children in care and their families. Below are a few that highlight the need for an impartial ombudsperson that can work collaboratively with all agencies and families. These cases demonstrate the added trauma, increased risk of placement disruption, (as children need stability), not to mention the increased caseloads and costs associated with cases lingering well beyond the time frames laid out for agencies.

- Three-month-old child placed in a foster home in August of 2017. Permanent custody granted by the courts in June of 2019. This has been the only placement for this child, and despite the desire and suitability of the foster family to adopt, as of May 2021, adoption is still not finalized. Child is now four years old.

- Child in permanent custody, placed in a foster home in May of 2019 with the goal of adoption. As of May 2021, adoption is still not finalized or scheduled. This is the only placement this child has known and the family is not only suitable, but desirous of adoption.
- A sibling group was removed from their biological parent's home, and placed in kinship care in July of 2018. This caregiver asked for the children to be moved in February 2019. They were placed in a foster home and later that year were returned to their biological mother's home, in spite of not completing the case plan. The children were neglected, living in hazardous conditions, and exposed to multiple men with past child endangerment charges. At that time, Children's Services still maintained custody of all children. The children were removed again in August 2019 and placed in a new foster home. In June 2020, the agency filed for permanent custody, but the hearing was not held until spring of 2021. Significant errors with the court case prolonged the process. The foster parents wanted to adopt the sibling group but were told not to expect a decision from the Judge for 9-months to one-year from the date of the hearing. They were then informed that it would be some months, perhaps up to a year beyond that, to finalize the adoption. At that time, the children will have potentially been in custody for four to five years.

Many more examples of the need for the establishment of an Ombudsman Office could be provided from my 20+ years of experience delivering treatment and consultation services within Ohio's child welfare field, but I believe these sufficiently illustrate the need. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and for your time and attention.