



**Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee  
Kristi Burre, Director, Governor's Children's Initiative  
House Bill 4 Proponent Testimony  
January 25, 2022**

Chairman Manning, Vice Chairman McColley, Ranking Member Thomas, and members of the committee, my name is Kristi Burre, and I am the director of the Governor's Children's Initiative. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today, to offer testimony in support of House Bill 4.

First and foremost, this legislation will enhance communication between our public children services agencies, law enforcement, and mandated reporters. We know that many of Ohio's counties have strong, existing partnerships with their law enforcement community. This is critical to the safety and protection of our most vulnerable kids. House Bill 4 requires the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services to adopt rules regarding which types of neglect reports must be forwarded to law enforcement. It also requires the department to develop a model memorandum of understanding for counties to use for this purpose; to ensure increased transparency and communication among PCSAs, law enforcement, and mandated reporters.

Governor DeWine has spent his career advocating for children and families. From his time as Greene County Prosecutor, his first year as Ohio Governor, and every office he has held in between, Governor DeWine has long prioritized children's safety. Immediately upon taking office, he created the Governor's Children's Initiative and tasked it with coordinating and aligning the state's children's programming, advancing policy and innovation within the state's children's programs, and providing supportive services for Ohio's most in-need children and families.

In 2019, Governor DeWine formed the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council, composed of Ohio's families, former foster youth, and subject matter experts. From November 2019 to January 2020, the Advisory Council held 10 forums across the state to hear from hundreds of Ohioans about their experiences with the children services system and their ideas for its improvement. In late 2020, the Advisory Council released its final report of recommendations for reforming our children services system, addressing action areas, including prevention, workforce challenges, practice, foster care, adoption, kinship care, and juvenile justice. The implementation of these recommendations has been a priority of Governor DeWine and the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

House Bill 110, Ohio's biennial budget bill, addressed a number of the Advisory Council's recommendations. House Bill 4 supports two additional ones: (1) the establishment of a state-level ombudsman, and (2) reforms to the home assessor process for prospective foster and adoptive families. Assessors conduct home visits and gather extensive information to ensure children's safety by assessing whether prospective families are able to meet the needs of children in foster care who have experienced trauma.



Regarding the recommendation to establish an ombudsman, the Advisory Council's final report said: *"Establish a state-level ombudsman to act as an independent entity for the investigation and resolution of concerns made by or on behalf of children and families involved with public children services agencies and private provider agencies that administer or oversee foster care or placement for the children services system."*

In response to widespread youth, stakeholder, and community feedback shared during the Advisory Council's statewide forums, House Bill 4 creates an independent Youth and Family Ombudsman Office. The office will be developed with the continued input of foster youth, public children services agencies, county departments of job and family services, private providers, and parents and caregivers. The office will be tasked with investigating and resolving concerns and complaints from and on behalf of children and families involved with the children services system.

The independent Ombudsman Office is an important first step in listening to the youth voice and using it to inform policy changes and programs. We are committed to this continued partnership with our youth advocates. In discussions regarding the Ombudsman Office, youth shared they felt disconnected from resources and needed help navigating the children services system. As a result, ODJFS has begun exploring ways to stand up a youth navigator program, which will support youth by answering their questions and providing information about the children services system. This program will complement the Ombudsman Office in a variety of ways. For example, the navigators can help youth get in touch with their caseworker or connect them with financial resources and Medicaid assistance.

Regarding the home assessor recommendation, the Advisory Council's final report said: *"For many prospective adoptive families, the wait to become certified can take months. The state should evaluate the current home assessor workforce, develop home study completion measures, and adjust requirements for assessors, if needed."*

House Bill 4 expands who is qualified to be a foster care and adoption home assessor so that more individuals can fill this role, thereby reducing wait times. It will allow assessors to be current or former caseworkers, supervisors, or individuals with a bachelor's degree in social work or a related human services field who have at least one year of experience working with children and families. This experience requirement is important and will help ensure that assessors have the experience and knowledge they need to make decisions that are not only timely, but in children's best interests.

I believe the inclusion of these two Advisory Council recommendations – in addition to the enhanced information sharing between public children services agencies, law enforcement, and mandated reporters – makes H.B. 4 worthy of your support. This legislation will help protect children and hasten permanent placements with willing, loving families.

In addition to my remarks, I have provided a copy of the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council's final report. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of this legislation.