

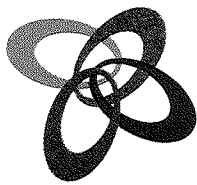
Senate Judiciary Committee
Opponent Testimony SB216
February 1, 2022
Heather O'Keefe, Deputy Director of Protective Services
Fairfield County Protective Services
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To members of the Senate Judiciary Committee,

My name is Heather O'Keefe and I work for Fairfield County Protective Services. Our agency works to protect children and elderly, encourage family stability, and promote self-reliance for a stronger community.

I am writing to voice my opposition to Senate Bill 216, Enact Dylan's law. Requiring substance-exposed infants to enter foster care for a pre-determined period of time while prohibiting parental contact/bonding and creating standardized conditions under which the infant may return home is not the appropriate way to address the addiction crisis or keep children safe. The tenets of Dylan's law directly contradict current best practice in the areas of Substance Use Disorder treatment, child welfare and pre-natal care for infants. Further, the bill directly contradicts the work of evidence-based programs like OhioSTART, which has been overwhelmingly successful within our agency and across the state. Research shows that factors such as increased agency contact, utilizing services such as peer recovery support staff, and collaboration with behavioral health partners offers these mothers an increased chance at overcoming addiction and keeping their children safely at home when possible. Our agency has found working to address the unique needs of each family, and partnering with peer recovery support, means parents are more likely to engage in services, and within a shorter time frame, preventing children from languishing in the foster care system. Limiting contact between a mother and her infant based on drug screening results punishes the child and begins a cycle of trauma that may take years to be undone. It does not motivate parents to become clean and sober.

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Addressing the needs of the current addiction crisis and assuring substance exposed infants needs are met is at the forefront of each child welfare agency's practice.

However, Senate Bill 216 makes that work more challenging for such agencies by removing the ability to address individual needs and circumstances of each family and directly contradicting mandates outlined within the Family First Act federal legislation.

Fairfield County Protective Services is committed to supporting families struggling with addiction and carefully assessing the safety of children who are substance exposed. We can continue to do this and achieve positive outcomes without a mandate to place every child who is substance exposed into foster care. I strongly urge you to oppose Senate Bill 216 and would welcome the opportunity to share information, detailed data and answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Heather O'Keefe

Deputy Director of Protective Services

Fairfield County Protective Services