



Janelle Shelton

Great Lakes Area Director

CarePortal

May 5, 2021

Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Fedor, and Members of the Senate Workforce & Higher Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present to you today. My name is Janelle Shelton and I am the Great Lakes Area Director for CarePortal.

CarePortal is a connective technology platform (think *Uber* for child welfare) that brings the needs of vulnerable children and families to those who have something to give and a desire to serve. Child serving professionals, such as social workers, uncover the needs. CarePortal shares these needs with local churches, organizations and individuals, giving them a real-time opportunity to respond and care for children in their own communities. These local churches and organizations provide services such as home repairs, beds, furniture, financial assistance for rent and utilities, transportation, food, clothing, educational needs, and relational wrap-around support necessary to ensure children's safety, stability and well-being – at no cost or obligation to the families being served.

To end the cycle of family breakdown, local churches must come alongside the child welfare system in a collaborative effort to care for children and families in crisis before, during, and beyond foster care. To accelerate impact, we are strategically focused on mobilizing local churches in the communities most impacted by the foster care crisis – in short, CarePortal will expand where the need is greatest. This includes a particular emphasis on communities of color most impacted by racial disproportionality in child welfare. In terms of racial disproportionality within foster care, we want to contribute to moving to a 1:1 ratio for African American children by empowering churches in communities of color to care for the children and families in their own neighborhoods, thereby safely reducing instances of unintentional neglect and lowering the number of children entering foster care.

CarePortal is currently active in twenty five states and has pilot projects in three Canadian provinces. In the U.S., we have served nearly 95,000 children and generated over \$31M in economic impact, in partnership with more than 2,700 local churches and approximately 400 child-serving agencies. Every request met helps vulnerable children in critical ways, from prevention, (safely reducing the number of children taken into foster care) to permanency (supporting foster and adoptive families or assisting with reunifications) to supporting youths aging out of foster care. **In Ohio, CarePortal has served more than 2,900 children and generated more than \$1M in local economic impact in partnership with more than 50 local churches and a dozen requesting agencies.**

CarePortal believes strategic collaboration between local churches and child-serving stakeholders in these cities is critical to reversing the foster care crisis in Ohio. Simultaneously, there are more than 10,000 local churches in Ohio filled with caring people who want to serve these children and their families but may not know how. What they need is a connection point. CarePortal makes the connection.

There are more than 400,000 children in the U.S. foster care system, spread across 3,100 counties. 50 percent of them live in just five percent of those counties (160); of those, 25 percent are concentrated in merely one percent of all counties nationwide. With 16,000 children in foster care, **Ohio has the fifth-highest foster care population** nationally, including six counties in that top five percent.

In addition to this extreme concentration of children and families in need, the crisis is even more acute for children of color. African American children represent 13 percent of our nation's children but make up 24 percent of children in foster care; in Ohio, 18 percent of children are African American; in foster care, that number is 30 percent. Additionally, more than two thirds of children in foster care are there as a result of neglect. Neglect often stems from poverty, isolation, and lack of a social network. We can reduce those numbers by focusing our efforts on meeting the needs of vulnerable kids and families earlier, partnering with "upstream" requesters like schools and other programs, and providing material and relational supports needed to strengthen and empower families, reducing instances of unintentional neglect, and in turn, safely lower the number of children entering foster care.

Allow me to share a recent story from Fairfield County to help demonstrate the impact of CarePortal.

A request came to my inbox for a single mom of two boys. They came to the attention of ODJFS due to truancy issues. Mom had nothing but a chair to move into her new apartment, and her youngest son had cystic fibrosis and required a special bed. The part that most grabbed my heart was the eight year old brother's wish for a basketball hoop for his room. I personally responded to this request; my boys helped me shop, and we began assembling pieces from anywhere and everywhere.

When we reached out to Mom, we found out that her little guy was in the ICU at Children's Hospital. This made me very concerned about the gently used couch we were giving them, which had been sitting in storage as I wanted to do what I could to protect our little guy's lungs. I was also concerned about the distance between my house and this family's, as they were going to need additional support beyond a truckload of furniture.

I called my friend from a non-profit pediatric clinic near the family – who turns out to be a research scientist who had specifically studied CF at Children's for years. He recommended a new sofa, and that we be very cautious in how we handled the connection. Mom had said she was comfortable with us delivering items to her apartment, if we took precautions. My Friend, who lives in her town, volunteered to do the connection himself, and to help connect her to other church and community resources if she wished!

When our boy came home, he had a new bed and adjustable frame waiting for him, with Paw Patrol bedding – and indoor basketball hoops for each brother! The boys were overjoyed as item after item came into their apartment and kept saying, "We're getting our big blessing!"

True to his word, my friend has continued to reach out to this family and to introduce them to other community resources and supports, ensuring a much brighter future!

We see these stories unfold every single day! CarePortal technology is making it possible for churches, businesses, and individuals to respond to the needs of vulnerable kids and families in their own neighborhoods, and lives are being changed!

CarePortal has a solid track record and has successfully contracted with local JFS offices since 2015. ODJFS has expressed great appreciation for our work, which continues to expand. We have also partnered with other types of requesters to focus our efforts upstream, including local schools and other community programs.

Our amendment request will support CarePortal's expansion in Ohio by partnering with social workers and staff in K-12 schools and other organizations serving in this space. Because children spend a significant time at school, K-12 social workers and educators on the front lines have the ability to quickly identify vulnerable children with acute and emergency needs. School district staff will be able to share these needs to a local network of committed churches, organizations, and individuals, and needs will be met. CarePortal's technology further allows for the electronic transfer of resources from outside the community to specially designated connecting churches within the community, allowing for meaningful connections and the opportunity for ongoing meaningful relationships. Particular focus will be given to communities of poverty and with high concentrations of children involved in the child welfare system. This K-12 prevention-based expansion will include the following:

Cuyahoga, Franklin, Hamilton, Lucas, Montgomery and Summit counties.

I am here today to respectfully request \$750,000/year in operating budget appropriations. We believes this project is an excellent fit with the Department of Education's Student Wellness and Success Fund.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions.