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**Proponent testimony submitted to the
Ohio Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee
House Bill 105
Caitlin Bentley, Director of Statewide Programming
Ohio Network of Children's Advocacy Centers
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Chair Brenner, Vice Chair Blessing, Ranking Member Fedor and esteemed members of the Senate Primary and Secondary Education Committee. I truly appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the Ohio Network of Children's Advocacy Centers, or ONCAC, and express our support of House Bill 105. ONCAC's membership consists of 34 accredited and developing child advocacy centers, which provide a variety of services to abused children throughout Ohio. These services include first response intervention (such as providing pediatric forensic examinations and medical support for child survivors), ongoing assistance (such as family advocacy and systems navigation), age appropriate therapeutic services, and participation in investigative efforts alongside law enforcement partners.

Many assumed that widespread COVID school closings would decrease the number of abuse reports our offices received, but instead we saw an increase from 9,000 in 2019 to over 9,600 in 2020. Child physical and sexual abuse is a difficult and uncomfortable topic, and abuse as a child can have far reaching impacts into adulthood. Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, can compound and build over time and result in a multitude of maladaptive and destructive behavior in adolescence and adulthood, including complex mental health issues, substance dependence, and



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problems regulating emotions. Patterns of abuse can be replicated, with a new generation of abuse beginning. Considering our ongoing crises of opioid addiction and mental health, we must ask ourselves: How many invisible victims are out there?

We know that 1 in 4 female and 1 in 6 male children will experience sexual abuse before 18. There are currently 2,670,658 children under 18 living in Ohio. Now consider again: How many invisible victims are out there? If these kids need help, do they know where to go? If an adult in their life needs help, do they know where to go?

Many referrals received by Ohio CACs come from mandated reporters, including police officers, first responders, doctors, and teachers. It's no coincidence that when schools resumed in-person classes, we saw an uptick in referrals. For many kids, school may be their only safe place and they may see their teacher as a sole protector. It is unfair to leave our educators with less than the best possible access to curriculum for increasing prevention education and tools for supporting students who disclose.

The burden of action should not sit on the shoulders of a single educator, or a single legislator, or a single advocate, or a single officer of the law. HB 105 gives us the opportunity to coordinate these local efforts statewide and utilize this collective effort to protect Ohio citizens from harm. HB 105, or Erin's Law, would help us open the doors of collaboration with our educators and administrators. Erin's Law would help us to rebuild a sense of trust in the aftermath of fear and violence by giving trusted adults the tools and special knowledge necessary to help children who are in a scary situation. Erin's



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Law would help us to prevent harm by responsibly empowering children with an ability to set boundaries with their own bodies, and an awareness of where to go and what to do if something bad or scary ever happens to them or to a friend.

Erin's Law is intended to help preserve the innocence of childhood. It is our burden, and our responsibility, as adults to respond and intervene in cases of abuse. It is our burden, and our responsibility, as adults to work together and stop it from happening in the first place. We can take this burden on together.

I appreciate your time today and the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 105. I am available to answer further questions at caitlin@oncac.org.