House Community and Family Advancement Committee

January 17, 2018

Proponent Testimony of Michael Patton

Hamilton County JFS

HB366

Chairman Ginter, Vice Chair LaTourette, Ranking Member Boyd, and members of the House Community and Family Advancement Committee, my name is Michael Patton, and I am the Assistant Director of Child Support Services in Hamilton County. I have been involved in the child support program for over ten years. Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to present proponent testimony on House Bill 366.

Hamilton County CSEA fully supports HB366, as it addresses long-standing issues regarding the way we calculate child support orders. As you have heard over and over again in testimony, no updates have been made to our child support tables in over 25 years, and there are significant updates that HB366 will make to modernize our child support guidelines.

I would like to focus my testimony on the local outreach we do in Hamilton County to engage low income families. Our child support program has vast experience in working with parents in poverty.

**Background**

We manage approximately 73,000 cases in Hamilton County and collect close to 66% of current support owed. We employ 136 child support professionals under the JFS umbrella.

**Testimony**

In 2011, upon my return to child support and after having served in a variety of capacities within Job and Family Services, it became apparent to me that a certain segment of our caseload continued to be non-compliant in meeting their support obligation regardless of the administrative enforcement techniques we used. Simply put, there were and still are non-custodial parents who are not compelled to pay support by the threat or execution of driver’s license suspensions, liens, bank account freezes/seizures or tax intercepts.

I wanted to understand why we continued to hover around a 66% collection rate on current support. I had heard and experienced the old adage that a third of our non-custodial parents pay support consistently, a third pay support intermittently, and third barely pay at all. It is a good way to explain the numbers and is true for the most part. A popular and effective strategy, which we employ, is to focus on those in the middle, a group commonly referred to as the willing and unable. However, I continued to struggle with the knowledge that the children and families of that bottom third, those who did not receive support payments, many of whom lived in poverty, would not receive support. What about those families and children? What could be done to help them get the support they deserved and needed?

It was clear that a change in approach was necessary. Existing child support law limits what we can do and for too long our efforts have not provided the flexibility necessary to address the full range of needs of the population we serve. As a result, I began working with local organizations like Talbert House that provide a full range of services to fathers to help them become better men in general and better fathers in particular. Many, if not most, of these men have a strong distrust of the child support system. So our posture has been to work closely with Talbert House and other organizations to do direct outreach and education to those men who are participating in their programming. We provide an on- site staff member once a week who answers questions, reviews payment obligations, explains the review and adjustment process, and most importantly, is someone who experienced the system first hand himself and can relate to the men and support their efforts to get on track.

In addition, we began working with Talbert House last year on an early intervention project that targets new non-custodial parents entering the child support system for the first time. Talbert House staff are located in our support establishment offices and recruit families up front to take advantage of employment, job readiness, and co-parenting services. Our goal is to improve the consistency of child support payments over the life of the order by helping fathers gain and maintain employment and helping families establish healthy co-parenting relationships. It is still early, but preliminary data suggest these voluntary interventions are working.

All of this work is aligned with spirit and the substantive elements of HB366. HB366 will update an outdated system and I believe it will get more child support into the hands of the families who need it so desperately. The update to the economic tables and self-sufficiency reserve, in particular, are steps in the right direction. We’ve heard from many low-income fathers who remain dis-engaged from the child support program and move from job to job to the underground economy because they believe the existing orders leave them unable to meet their own basic needs. One must also consider the employment options available in today’s economy for unskilled workers, many of whom are in the child support system. I am hopeful that the bottom third I mentioned earlier will be more likely to get consistent payments over the life of the order that are tracked through the system with the implementation of the self-sufficiency reserve and the update to the economic tables. I also support the other elements of the bill, including the parenting time adjustment, multiple family orders adjustment, health insurance and cash medical modernization, and the child care credit changes.

Times are changing, family structures and roles are changing, and we must change with them. This bill does not “soften” the program, as I have heard some say. I do understand the position of some of the opponents of this bill that envision this bill taking money out of the hands of custodial parents and children who need it. I would offer that, instead, this bill will do the opposite. The proposed updates to the economic tables and the self-sufficiency reserve will modernized the program and increase the likelihood that families in poverty receive more than they have in the past. This bill and everyone who has worked to bring it forward have years of experience in the program and have identified areas of opportunity will make the program stronger for all families.

We can continue to stand defiantly behind an outdated punitive approach to child support enforcement or we can move with the times and work to make the program work for everyone. I believe that we owe it to all of our families, including the third who rarely get anything, many of whom live in poverty, to do what we can to make sure we remain flexible in our efforts to meet their needs.

A report by the U.S. Census Bureau released in January 2016 showed that child support income accounted for over two-thirds (70.3 percent) of the mean annual personal income for custodial parents below poverty who received full child support. This data is a stark reminder of how critical child support income is to families is poverty. We need to update and refresh our program.

I appreciate your time today and am happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.