Chairman Ginter, Ranking Member Boyd and members of the House Community and Family Advancement Committee:

My name is Betsie Norris and I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present my views on HB 448. My sincere appreciation goes to Reps. Boyd and LaTourette for their work and leadership on this important issue.

I am the founder and executive director of Adoption Network Cleveland: The Ohio Family Connection. We provide advocacy, support, programming and education for adoptees, adoptive families, birth families, and youth in foster care/foster care alumni. We are celebrating our 30th anniversary this year and have been involved in legislative advocacy throughout our years, primarily focused on elevating the collective voices of those most directly touched by our state’s laws in this area: adoptees, birth and adoptive families, and youth in foster care.

This bill addresses issues that many of us take for granted. How many of us have thought that as children our legal and emotional relationship with our siblings could dissolve, and through a situation beyond our control? Not many of us I believe. Siblings are typically the longest standing relationship most of us will have over our lives – spanning more years than parents or spouses. Siblings offer bonds, shared life experiences, lessons in social skills and more. For children who enter foster care or lose other family bonds through adoption, the sibling relationship can be all the more important and act as a buffer and promote resilience. For example, a young child’s secure attachment to an older sibling can diminish the impact of adverse circumstances such as parental mental illness, substance abuse, or loss (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007; Kittmer, 2005; Sanders, 2004).

Currently Ohio law allows the relationship between a parent and a child to control the relationship between siblings. Adopted children are legally severed from their siblings and it is unclear whether permanent custody ends a sibling relationship. Although federal and state law requires children in foster care be given the opportunity to visit with their siblings, this right does not extend beyond adoption and can be withheld by caseworkers without direct judicial consideration. Siblings should be a source of comfort and stability to children as their relationships to the adults in their lives change. Therefore, Ohio law should allow siblings to petition for visitation and preserve their legal sibling relationships. House Bill 448 addresses these issues.

Please see the attached bulletin, *Sibling Issues in Foster Care* *and Adoption*, developed by the Child Welfare Information Gateway made possible by the Children’s Bureau, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Topics covered include:

* Defining a sibling relationship
* Legal framework for protecting sibling connections
* The importance of siblings
* Sibling relationships in abusive or neglectful families
* Benefits of placing siblings together
* Barriers to placing siblings together
* Practices for keeping siblings together in placement
* When siblings cannot live in the same home
* Maintaining ties between separated siblings
* Sibling issues within the foster or adoptive family

This bulletin contains the body of research, back up and reasoning behind the main elements of HB 448 and why it is crucial for Ohio to address these issues. Rather than reiterate all of the points here, I request that you review this bulletin.

House Bill 448 is critical for Ohio’s children in that it:

1. Defines sibling to be those sharing at least one biological or adoptive parent or raised in the same household as siblings.
2. Clarifies that, in line with the federal Fostering Connections Act, a public children services agency “shall” make reasonable efforts to place siblings together and maintain frequent contact, unless it is not in their best interests, rather than “strongly encouraged to” or “should” make reasonable efforts.
3. Explicitly states the sibling relationship extends beyond permanent custody order (termination of parental rights) and adoption in order to allow for inheritance, notification for placement in substitute care, and the right to petition for visitation.
4. Specifically allows for siblings (minors and adults) to petition for visitation where at least one of them is in the custody of juvenile court or has been adopted. Upon judicial review, visitation would be granted only when it was in the child’s best interests.

HB 448 brings Ohio in line with standards outlined in federal law as well as recognized best practices. Ohio’s children, and their brothers and sisters, deserve attention to these issues.

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Attachment: *Sibling Issues in Foster Care* *and Adoption*, developed by the Child Welfare Information Gateway.