**HB 448**

**Proponent Testimony**

**George R. Graham**

**Member of Adoption Network Cleveland**

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

My name is George Graham, and I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present my views on HB 448. I would also like to thank Reps. Boyd and LaTourette for their work and leadership on this issue.

My husband, Michael Fleenor, and I are adoptive parents of two children: Robert (15) and Ellen (11). Robert was placed in our home as a foster child in 2003 when he was six weeks old. He had biweekly visits with his siblings and other family members while he was in foster care until he was placed in permanent custody later that year. At that point birth family visits were terminated. He was placed with us to adopt, and the adoption was finalized in 2004, 15 months after he arrived in our home.

Four years later our daughter Ellen arrived through a private adoption. (Our children are not biologically related.) Her birthmother selected us via an adoption profile, and then we met her and a daughter whom she was parenting before Ellen was born. We discussed openness and developed an agreement. Ellen’s birthmother invited us to be present for her birth and we took her home at two days old. Although we were already committed to openness because we understood from training through Adoption Network Cleveland that it was most often in the best interest of adopted children, Ellen’s birthmother allowing us to be present for Ellen’s birth made us even more determined to maintain contact. Over the past 11 years, we have arranged visits about once a quarter with Ellen’s birthmother, birth sister, and the siblings who have followed.

Several years into those visits, our son said, “It’s not fair. Ellen gets to see her birth family, but I don’t.” Fortunately, we were able to identify two of his siblings in a Heart Gallery that featured portraits of children waiting for adoption. Through their social worker, we arranged a visit with his siblings. We have continued to support contact with siblings for both children. This takes extra work on our part, but seeing our children interact with their birth siblings makes the effort worth it. We are convinced that it has promoted our children’s sense of wellbeing, identity, and healthy development. These visits have not in any way diminished our sense of parenthood or our cohesion as a family.

Much has been written about the importance of the lifelong bond of siblings as a primary relationship. While our children are bonded to each other, we are grateful that they have also been able to form relationships with their birth siblings, which we believe will be sources of support as they become independent adults. In considering this legislation, I believe it’s important to consider not only the extra demands it might place on the courts, child welfare agencies, or adoptive parents, but ultimately what is in the best interest of adopted children. While I recognize there are situations where contact with siblings might not be appropriate, I believe strongly that assisting adopted children in visiting with their siblings is very often in their best interest and thus deserves support through legislation.

In addition to supporting sibling visits, I support provisions in HB 448 that strengthen measures that ensure that siblings are placed together whenever possible. When we expressed interest in placement of our son in 2003, we also expressed openness to placement of his next oldest brother who was in a separate foster home. A decision was made to leave the brother placed where he was, and we do not feel that keeping the brothers together was given enough weight in the decision. Without our efforts to reconnect, this tie, which has become our son’s closest relationship among his birth siblings, might have been lost altogether. We hope that adoption practice has changed in the 15 years since our son was placed in our home, but we believe that the law should be strengthened to protect sibling bonds whenever possible.

Finally, we support an expanded definition of siblings proposed in HB 448 to recognize the complexity of many family structures and to make sure that children who are related by birth, adoption, or by being raised in the same family have the right to request to visit. I say this as an adoptive parent whose partner was not recognized as a co-parent or protected by state law for many years. Our children were placed with us long before we were able to be legally married. As an unmarried couple, legally only one of us could adopt. We decided that both children should be adopted by one of us so that they would be legally related as siblings. If I had adopted one child and my partner had adopted the other, they would not have been legally related, which might have had legal implications even long after our lives. I became the legal adoptive parent for both children. Fortunately, we were able to be married two years ago and my husband completed second parent adoptions for both children this spring, so he is finally recognized as a legal parent fifteen years after we began our journey as parents. The definition of siblings is a different issue, yet my experience in a family affected by the legal definition of parent makes me an advocate for a broader definition of sibling in this case. In this age of blended, diverse, and complex family structures, I would support an expanded definition of siblings in order for adopted individuals to maintain contact with their siblings.

In summary, from my perspective as an adoptive parent who has supported contact with my children’s birth siblings, I would like to restate my support for HB 448. I can attest that our children’s visits with their birth siblings have been very important to their development and well-being, and I support this legislation that would enable visits for more adopted children with their siblings when it is in their best interest. In addition, I support strengthening provisions for siblings to be placed together and for the definition of siblings to be broadened to reflect the realities of contemporary family structures.

Thank you for this opportunity to offer this testimony in support of HB 448.