Siblings.

Thank you for the opportunity to share a few words of testimony with you today and I am honored that we will have a chance to view a short film about some of our work.  I would like to bring three perspectives to light for your consideration.  First, that siblings are uniquely connected through blood, through shared experiences, and through a collective resilience.  Second, that there are thousands of children in foster care right now who do not see their siblings on a consistent basis which causing compounding trauma which can and does last a lifetime.  And finally, that Ohio has an opportunity through this legislation to move child welfare practice forward and to join the national movement which recognizes that children heal and grow in the context of relationships and not systems.

Brothers and sisters through blood and through shared experiences are the only people in the world who can relate to the trauma a child in foster care has experienced.  I have had the honor of working in child welfare for the last 17 years – my entire carrier – and have been taught by hundreds of youth that maintaining sibling connects can lead to processing of the grief and loss our children experience.  We talk about permanency as being a sense of belonging and identity.  Our children had permanency with their siblings before they were removed from their family.  Many children believe that if they are adopted they will no longer be able to see their siblings.  Children blame themselves for the loss of relationships.  One of the young men you will see in the film was in 37 foster placements.  He was the common denominator for the loss of relationships, including all of his siblings.  A devastating number of children who leave foster care without permanency are destine for homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, and isolation.    Keeping siblings connected leads to better permanency outcomes.

My work takes me to many Ohio counties.  Those who are willing to be honest, to take a hard look in the mirror, and even those who excel at maintaining sibling connections will tell you that they can and must do more for siblings.  To close the gap from where we are to where we want to be we must do a better job of honoring youth voice.  Our kids know who they feel a sense of bonding and connection to.  We can honor connections and keep kids safe.  These are not mutually exclusive goals.

And finally, the Family First Preservation Act, the Ohio Continuum of Care Reform, and the investments from the Ohio Attorney General in foster care solutions all reinforce the recognition that we can do more to keep children safe and connected.  Safety is not just physical.  Emotional and relational safety is achieved when a person is connected to their community, to their culture, and to their kin.  I once heard a child say “you took me from a bad situation and left me with no one – I don’t know which is worse.”  This legislation is a children’s rights bill.  It is a bill about honoring youth voice and about fulfilling the promise that was made to our children.  If this bill passes it will advance practice and demonstrate that Ohio is working to lead the effort of keeping children connected.

Thank you for your time and your consideration.