

**Proponent Testimony Regarding HB 302
House Health Committee
Graham Bowman, Attorney
Ohio Poverty Law Center
February 14, 2018**

Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the House Health Committee,

My name is Graham Bowman. I am an attorney with the Ohio Poverty Law Center. Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding House Bill 302 and the positive impact it would have on the health and well-being of unaccompanied homeless youth.

The Ohio Poverty Law Center is a state-wide nonprofit law office that advocates for evidenced-based policies aimed at protecting the rights of low-income Ohioans living, working, and raising their families in poverty. We work closely with eight legal aid agencies that represent thousands of families every year across the state in promoting access to healthcare, family stability, and expanded access to justice and opportunity.

House Bill 302 is necessary to ensuring Ohio's most vulnerable young women can access safe and professional prenatal care. If passed, this bill would bring Ohio consent law in line with approximately 36 other states and constitute a major step forward in addressing the interrelated problems of the infant mortality crisis and youth homelessness in our state.

Unaccompanied Youth

Unaccompanied homeless youth are typically defined as 14 to 24-year-olds who live outside of the care of a parent or legal guardian and who are also not part of the foster care system. Youth homelessness is an often-times invisible problem that affects both rural and urban communities across the country at surprisingly similar rates. According to a first ever comprehensive study published in November 2017 by the University of Chicago, an estimated 1 of every 30 adolescent minors experience homelessness every year. This accounts for approximately 4.2% of youth in urban counties and 4.4% in rural counties.¹

There is no one cause of youth homelessness, however, it is rarely a choice. Abuse, neglect, family drug addiction or struggles with mental health, a death in the family—these are all common

¹ Chapin Hall, University of Chicago, *Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America* (November 2017), <http://voicesofyouthcount.org/brief/national-estimates-of-youth-homelessness/>

issues that can force minors from their home and into unstable living situations where they must rely on informal networks of friends and acquaintances to survive.

Teen Pregnancy

Unplanned teen pregnancy can cause major disruption in any family, but this disruption is especially severe in low-income families where resources are already spread thin. During my time representing homeless youth in Chicago, I met countless young women who were forced to leave home by their parents after becoming pregnant. Illinois was one of the approximately 36 other states in the country that allows minors to consent to health care services related to their pregnancy. As a result, these soon-to-be mothers were not alone despite being homeless. There were a wide variety of professional, licensed health care providers that were ready and able to assist my clients through the challenges of pregnancy and young motherhood. Some providers had special practice groups that developed an expertise on working with unstably housed unaccompanied teens. Many of these young people eventually reunited with their families with the help the support of various health care professionals and social service agencies.

Without an equivalent law in Ohio allowing minors to consent to their own pregnancy-related health care, young women who find themselves in this situation are unable to access prenatal health care services or related counseling unless they obtain consent from a parent or guardian, which for some young people is impossible for many of the reasons I mentioned earlier.

Homeless youth are extremely vulnerable and face a number of increased risks. The Ohio Attorney General's Office's 2017 Human Trafficking Report found that trafficked individuals were most frequently young and a high percentage were homeless.² Ohio also has one of the worst infant mortality rates in the country. The Health Policy Institute of Ohio's December 2017 report on infant mortality identified homelessness and housing instability as a significant driver of the problem.³ According to Ohio Better Birth Outcomes collaborative, women who receive late or no prenatal care are at higher risk of having babies that: arrive too soon, are born too small, have birth defects, developmental issues, or chronic medical conditions.⁴

There are high quality health care providers throughout the state that are skilled in providing age appropriate pre-natal care to teenagers who are currently unable to serve unaccompanied minors because of Ohio's outdated consent laws regarding pregnancy. You have before you a letter signed by some of those providers who collaborate with legal aid attorneys in northeast Ohio and who are members of the Infant Mortality Pathway Hub in the Mahoning Valley. In their letter, those organizations state their support for this bill and readiness to begin serving this at-risk population should the General Assembly pass HB 302.

² Ohio Attorney General's Office, *2017 Human Trafficking Commission – Annual Report* (January 2018), http://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Files/Publications-Files/Publications-for-Law-Enforcement/Human-Trafficking-Reports/HTC-2017-Annual-Report_Web.aspx

³ Health Policy Institute of Ohio, *A New Approach to Reduce Infant Mortality and Achieve Equity* (December 1, 2017), <http://www.healthpolicyohio.org/social-determinants-of-infant-mortality-advisory-group/>

⁴ Ohio Better Health Outcomes Collaborative, <http://ohiobetterbirthoutcomes.org/prenatal-care/>

We ask that you vote yes on HB 302 and allow these minors to ensure their pregnancy is a safe one by connecting them with professional health care providers who can guide them through this challenging time for their family.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I am available to answer any questions members of the committee may have.

Graham Bowman