

Ohio Senate
Senate Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee
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Good afternoon, Chairman Hoagland, Vice Chair Schaffer, Ranking Member O'Brien, and members of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony as a proponent in consideration of Senate Bill 340 (SB 340).

I come before this committee with many titles. I am a Veteran. At 21-years-old I raised my right hand to serve in the United States Navy driving ships all over the world to deter our adversaries. After several years on Active Duty, I chose to serve in the Navy Reserves, volunteering to go to Afghanistan in 2018.

I am a foster parent. My husband and I became licensed as foster parents in 2016 ready to bring kids into our home and send them back to live with their parents when they were ready. In the last 4 years we have had dozens of kids come through our home. I had intentions of keeping a list, but the calls come quickly and I have lost track. We take kids over 10-years-old and have had the honor to reunify kids and help them emancipate.

I am an advocate and trainer. My specific area of expertise is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders. That's why we're here today and I mention my history because it very much applies. When I began taking foster placements I noticed a common set of symptoms that were not trauma.

As I mentored other families, I saw they were experiencing the same symptoms. They often were considering, and many did, removing the children from their homes because they did not know how to respond to the symptoms. I started training people because I saw the challenges others faced and I wanted to see more families succeed. I quickly became a resource throughout the state with calls and emails coming daily of new families who needed support.

This may seem as if it doesn't affect your constituents. I assure you that it does. In 2018, a study done by UNC Chapel Hill of first graders all over the country found that a conservative estimate of children who met criteria for an FASD is 2-5% (May et al, 2018). The less conservative estimate is 3-10% of the population. The generally accepted prevalence rate is 5%. What does this mean for Ohio? 5% of Ohio's population is 584,500 Ohioans. Over half a million Ohioans are estimated to have an FASD. The good news is that FASD is preventable.

Alcohol affects the brain in the most basic ways during pregnancy. As science continues to learn more about the fetal development cycles we are finding more and more that alcohol can have a very serious effect on a fetus even early in pregnancy before a woman knows that she is pregnant. We know that 50% of pregnancies are unplanned and most women don't find out that they are pregnant until 4-6 weeks. In fact, a study found that 49.7% of pregnancies were

alcohol exposed. Of the pregnancies that were alcohol exposed in the first month, they were at 37% greater risk to have a miscarriage with the greatest risk of miscarriage in week 9 (Sundermann et al, 2020). Those babies' lives were lost due to a lack of communication to women as to the dangers of alcohol to a developing fetus. It is on us as a society to share the facts that I am sharing with you today. So that all women know.

The reality is that prenatal alcohol exposure can cause permanent damage resulting in limb deformation, microcephaly, organ deformation, seizures, and early and low-weight birth. In fact there are 400 comorbid diagnoses to FASD as alcohol is the biggest cause of birth defects in the United States.

As kids get older we notice attention deficits, memory challenges, hyperactivity, poor understanding of cause and effect, poor social skills, impulsivity, and cognitive deficits. However, 70% of individuals with an FASD have an IQ higher than 70 so they often don't qualify for supports in school or through their Board of DD.

What happens when FASD isn't prevented, identified, or supported early enough? We start seeing secondary behavioral concerns such as mental health diagnoses, aggression, truancy, and school suspensions. Individuals with an FASD are 30 times more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system (McLachlan et al, 2018). Individuals in foster care are 17-19 times more likely to have an FASD leaving more of a financial burden on the state to find proper placements (Lang et al, 2013). These children are a part of the multi-system youth population. I know this because I serve on a call with the state discussing how to best serve multi-system youth and I have yet to be on a call where FASD wasn't a topic of discussion.

FASD is highly underdiagnosed with that 2018 study having only 1% of the children previously diagnosed. Unfortunately in Ohio there are only 3 clinics that regularly diagnose FASD and they are all in Northern Ohio leaving a quarter of a million Ohioans with no place to receive a diagnosis, including my own family.

I want to place a big caveat on all that I just said. This does not just impact individuals in poverty. The 2018 study found FASD to be equally present in all socioeconomic groups. This is impacting middle and upper class families. However, families with less financial resources are less likely to have the ability to pay for supports that their children don't qualify for.

Additionally, individuals with an FASD are not defined by their struggles, but rather their strengths. I know individuals with FASD who are kind and compassionate, amazingly good at music, so talented at art, master woodworkers, and future social workers. This population deserves to be respected and not pitied.

Why does this matter to Ohio? Because it is costing Ohio. Big time. 30% of individuals with an FASD struggle with substance abuse at some point due to lack of support (Adams, 2013). 80% of women who do drugs also drink during pregnancy (Chasnoff). It is true that more babies are being born with FASD because of the opioid crisis. It is also true that individuals with FASD are

more likely to use opioids if undiagnosed and unsupported. Prevention and early intervention of FASD is key to helping reduce the numbers of users. Ohio State estimated in 2017 that the opioid crisis costs Ohio \$8.8 billion a year.

FASD is 2.5 times as common as Autism and has none of the supports afforded to children on that Spectrum. A study found that the cost for an individual with FASD is \$23,000 per year. Comparing that to an annual cost for Autism of \$17,000 (Burd et al, 2018).

If we multiply that annual cost by the amount of people I estimated to live in Ohio with an FASD we arrive at an amount of \$13 billion. That is over a third of the state's annual budget. That is almost as much as we spend in Medicaid and more than we spend on K-12 Education. What if we could save the state millions by passing legislation?

An article by the University of Oregon says that, "In states requiring the signage, drinking by pregnant women is down 11 percent, Cil found. She also found evidence of fewer premature births coming with less than 32 weeks gestation and fewer births of babies weighing less than 3.5 pounds. The biggest effects were among women 30 and older."

What if we could cut the percentage of individuals in Ohio with FASD by 11%? That would reduce costs based on my previous estimates by \$1.5 billion. This simple act of placing a sign can help educate women as to the dangerous effects and create positive ramifications for Ohioans and Ohio's budget.

Ohio would be the 25th state in the Union to pass such legislation setting an example for our neighboring states that we prioritize the health of pregnant women and the lives of the babies that they carry.

What does this have to do with my service? Because in over a decade of service to my country, including being an Army spouse, with 5 deployments between us, the hardest thing we have ever done is advocate for our children with FASD. We never give up on a mission and advocating for FASD is my life's mission. I wish for more women to be encouraged during pregnancy to maintain sobriety and a good first step for that is to let them know about the dangers of alcohol. We want to see women supported and not shamed. Also maybe we can save the state \$1.5 billion annually.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony as a proponent. I am happy to answer any questions the committee may have.