

Chairman Hillyer, Vice Chairwoman Grendell, Ranking Member Galonski, and Members of the House Civil Justice Committee. Thank for the opportunity to provide my written testimony in support of H.B. 648.

My name is Paula Giulitto. I am the Judge of the Portage County Domestic Relations Court. The Court was legislatively created in 1987 through Ohio Revised Code §2301.03 (P) and vested with jurisdiction over all divorce, dissolution of marriage, legal separation, and annulment cases, and derivative issues involving children born of married persons. The Juvenile Court has jurisdiction over cases involving children born of never married persons; children who are abused, neglected or dependent; and children who are delinquent.

H.B. 648 is the collaborative effort of the Domestic Relations and Juvenile Courts to request the expanded configuration of the Domestic Relations Court to include exclusive jurisdiction over paternity, custody, visitation, child support, allocation of parental rights and responsibilities involving children born between unmarried persons, post-decree proceedings arising from those cases, cases falling under the Uniform Interstate Family Support Act, and other related cases. We are requesting an effective date of July 1, 2023.

Both Courts endorse the reconfiguration to best serve the Portage County community and families involved in litigation of domestic matters. The Portage County Bar Association, Portage County Board of Commissioners, and the Supreme Court of Ohio support our request.

The reality of what a “family” looks like has changed dramatically over the last 35 years. Reconfiguration of the Domestic Relations Court will result in all family matters being litigated in one court. One Family – One Court. The unraveling of a family or relationship – whether by divorce or breakup - is traumatic to parents, children, and often extended families. Removing the confusion of litigating in multiple forums with different rules will reduce some of the stress, frustration, and angst experienced during this time. Case management and case flow efficiencies will also be enhanced.

The current division of jurisdiction between the Portage County Domestic Relations and Juvenile Courts caused there to be duplicative, but not identical, services instituted to manage parenting-related issues. This has resulted in different and inconsistent outcomes for families which may have similar factual circumstances. The importance of fairness and consistency extends to all cases, but it is especially important when dealing with families. Whether a child is born to a married couple or an unmarried couple, it should make no difference in terms of where parents go to resolve custodial disputes.

Economically and practically, the benefits of family matters being litigated in one court makes good sense. Expanding the jurisdiction of the Domestic Relations Court to address all issues involved in the end of a marriage or relationship and child-related issues benefits families. The reconfiguration will permit both the Domestic Relations and Juvenile Courts to be proactive in developing new programming and providing services to meet the needs of particular case types without having to duplicate services. Continuity of services will continue for the transferred cases, and families will benefit from consistency in the litigation process. The Juvenile Court will be able to focus on developing new programming and providing services to the youth and families going through matters involving child dependency, abuse, neglect or delinquency.

The citizens, judges, and attorneys deserve a judicial system that provides a degree of equality in how families are treated, services available, and consistent outcomes. For these reasons, we respectfully request that this Committee approve and recommend the legislative expansion of the jurisdiction of the Portage County Domestic Relations Court.