

My name is Sally Dyer and I am from Dayton. I'd like to begin by thanking Chairwoman Manning, Vice-Chair Bird and Ranking Member Robinson, and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to submit my testimony in writing. I have testified in front of this committee in person twice before, in 2017 and 2019, on the legislation known as Erin's Law. I am unable to be there today and hope you will take a few minutes to read this written testimony.

I have devoted most of my adult life to advocating for and acting on issues impacting the health and safety of children. I was the Team Coordinator for the CARE team - a multidisciplinary child abuse team at Children's Medical Center in Dayton for 3 years; I served as a volunteer CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate / Guardian Ad Litem) and represented more than 40 abused, neglected and dependent children in Montgomery County over the course of 18 years; and facilitated the development and management of multiple mentoring programs in both public and charter schools in Dayton over the past 2 decades.

I'm confident many of you have already heard some of these statistics, so I will summarize only a few. A 2005 Center for Disease Control (CDC) report estimated that *1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys will experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of eighteen*. In the same report, *approximately 1 in 5 female high school students reported being physically and/or sexually abused by a dating partner*. Furthermore, "disclosure of sexual abuse is often delayed; children often avoid telling because they are either afraid of a negative reaction from their parents or of being harmed by the abuser. As such, they often delay disclosure until adulthood."¹ Children are often warned against or threatened about exposing the secret. So, sadly, the reported statistics in this area are widely acknowledged as underreported.²

The Rape, Assault and Incest National Network (RAINN), reports that "every 73 seconds an American is sexually assaulted. And every 9 minutes, that victim is a child." Those are alarming statistics in and of themselves, but even more so, that *"as many as 93 percent of victims under the age of 18 know the abuser."*³ Childhood sexual abuse and assault happens in families, in schools, in neighborhoods, and much more frequently than any of us realize because the victim is often too scared or ashamed to tell a trusted adult.

All of the above statistics can and should be magnified in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. A research article published in December 2020, noted that "With the Covid-19 pandemic contributing to social conditions that created a perfect storm for risk of child maltreatment, and fewer adults available to surveil children's safety, children are poised to be hidden victims of Covid-19."⁴

¹Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Data and Statistics*. Atlanta, GA: Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

² The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Child Sexual Abuse Fact Sheet, April 2009

³ <https://www.rainn.org/about-sexual-assault>, The Rape, Assault and Incest National Network

⁴ Perfect Storm: Hidden The Risk of Child Maltreatment During the Covid-19 Pandemic

I have discovered a very thorough analysis of the impact of COVID 19 on the reporting of child abuse to Ohio agencies written by Emily Muttillo of The Center for Community Solutions published in April 2021. In it she highlights the importance of schools and teachers when it comes to identifying victims of child abuse. She wrote:

“Being outside of the watchful eyes of other adults – like teachers and other school employees – left a void in the system designed to protect children from abuse and neglect. As the world begins to feel the hope of a post-COVID-19 life made possible by vaccinations, our community must also prepare to face the reality that perhaps thousands of Ohio’s children have experienced abuse or neglect that has gone unreported.”⁵ Erin’s Law education would greatly enhance the likelihood that these children would disclose the abuse and then get the help they need.

It is already well known that when children do disclose abuse, *teachers are the most likely professional to be told*.⁶ Also, “A report released by the Children’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in January 2020 found that educators are the top reporters of suspected child abuse and neglect accounting for more than 20 percent of all referrals.”⁷

Gov. DeWine is focused on improving pediatric mental health for Ohio’s children. The Governor has stated, “we know what impact that trauma has on children, we have to do something about it.”⁸ I’m confident that the amount of trauma experienced by our children during the pandemic will be impacting them and our mental health system for years to come. On March 1, 2020 Governor DeWine said, “As a state, we must do better for at-risk children. We have to be constantly vigilant to ensure that we are driving policy that ensures that best practices are in place to keep children safe.” I believe that HB 105 would support the Governor’s goal to better serve our at-risk children.

HB 105 is certainly *not* a partisan issue. I cannot imagine any priority higher than protecting our children. In the years since I began advocating for the passage of Erin’s Law in Ohio in 2016 shocking events around the sexual abuse of our children continue to make headlines regularly. In 2020 alone the headlines included the Springboro OH elementary school case involving more than 80 first grade girls, other headlines from my Dayton-area community have included multiple cases involving child pornography by trusted community leaders, including a former suburban police chief and an influential child psychologist...with whom I worked closely when I was

Christina M. Rodriguez, Shawna J. Lee, Kaitlin P. Ward....
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⁵ <https://www.communitysolutions.com/research/child-abuse-neglect-referrals-not-good-news/> by Emily Muttillo

⁶ Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2005). *Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Data and Statistics*. Atlanta, GA: Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

⁷ Child Maltreatment 2018. Children’s Bureau (Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2018>

⁸ <https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/local/dewine-visits-dayton-children-announce-mental-health-summit/216BpWKfmDpIDGKR4aQEbK/>

the CARE Team coordinator. These situations all highlight the need to give “tools” to our children and to empower them to stay safe and/or seek safety from harm...which frequently comes from people you’d least expect or suspect.

It is my sincere hope that this is the final time this legislation needs to be introduced in the General Assembly of Ohio and that this committee will support and make it a priority. The urgent need to pass HB 105 is magnified in light of the pandemic. Our children need to know that it is OK to tell their teachers or other school staff members if they have experienced abuse - in any form. I urge this committee to take a vote *today* in support of HB 105 so that it can move forward in the legislation process. Ohio’s children are depending on you to make this a priority.

I leave you with this quote from Dr. Bruce Perry, author of the book The Boy Who Was Raised As A Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist’s Notebook / What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love and Healing,

“Ultimately what determines how children survive trauma, physically, emotionally or psychologically, is whether the people around them - particularly the adults they should be able to trust and rely on - stand by them with love, support and encouragement.”⁹

Will you be one of the adults the children in your district can rely on? I certainly hope so.

Thank you for your time and concern for Ohio’s children.
Sally Dyer

⁹ Perry MD PhD., Bruce D. And Szalavitz, Maia; The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog and Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist’s Notebook, What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love and Healing. Pg xxviii