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Joint Sponsor Testimony

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Good afternoon Chairwoman Schmidt, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Denson, and esteemed members of the Families and Aging committee. I am honored to be here today to discuss HB 7, which aims to support children in Ohio from birth to age 3. I want to express my gratitude to my joint sponsor, Representative White, for her hard work and dedication to this important cause.

The Strong Foundations Act seeks to make Ohio a place where women want to have their children and ensure every child in Ohio, from urban to rural areas, has the opportunity to succeed. Unfortunately, according to Groundwork Ohio's Early Childhood Dashboard, Ohio ranks worse than other states in the U.S. in various regions of childbearing. Compared to the U.S., almost twice as many newborn babies are sent to the NICU,..

There is a higher infant mortality rate....

a higher number of maternal deaths....

and a higher number of women diagnosed with postpartum depression.

These trends have worsened or remained the same over the past three years in Ohio, making it clear that something must be done urgently.

After analyzing these trends, we have concluded that Ohio needs to find a way to support children and babies while they're here AND before birth. This is why Representative White and I developed a multipronged approach to alleviate some of these problems and make Ohio a better place to give birth and raise a family.

Ohio's HB 7 will cover many areas, including addressing the mortality rates of infants and mothers, health outcomes, mental health, pre-and postnatal health care, and early intervention. My colleague did an excellent job summarizing the bill, so I won't belabor the point here. However, I want to highlight a few aspects of the bill that I am particularly excited about.

Firstly, this legislation will fund early head start programs by initiating a pilot prioritizing urban, rural, and Appalachian communities. These areas are associated with higher rates of infant mortality and lower rates of access to quality pre-k programs, such as head start. According to the case study I mentioned earlier, we know that 62% of children in Ohio do not demonstrate kindergarten readiness, and less than 1 in 5 Ohio babies from families with low income even have access to an early learning program. The pilot will invest \$6 million in creating quality early head start programs, and we will also include a two-year resiliency grant to support wraparound services.

Secondly, I am a strong advocate for housing and housing reform, and this legislation aims to increase access to safe, stable, and quality housing for pregnant women by expanding access to the "Healthy Beginnings at Home" program, which is already supported by the governor and included in his budget proposal.

According to statistics, "kindergarteners of color and those who are economically disadvantaged are disproportionately affected by homelessness. In addition, when working, families pay 30% or more of their monthly income on rent. This element of HB 7 attempts to alleviate the problems of homeless children and the cost burden on families.

Lastly, mental health treatment is a critical aspect of this legislation. We all know that mental health is a serious issue, not only in Ohio but everywhere. We also know that it is an issue better tackled early on. With the passing of this legislation, the Department of Medicaid will evaluate and identify payment models to support evidence-based therapy options for young children from birth through age five. The Department of Medicaid will also allow reimbursement for services related to mental health assessment and diagnosis. This will ensure that children are not only getting the medical services they need physically but also mentally.

In conclusion, children and, more specifically, babies in Ohio deserve the support and the opportunity to succeed. Thank you all for allowing hb7 to be heard today. I am excited to work with all of you to make Ohio a better place to raise a family.

“Early Childhood Dashboard: Groundwork Ohio.” *Groundwork*, <https://www.groundworkohio.org/dashboard>.