



**Ohio House of Representatives
House Families and Aging Committee
House Bill 7
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Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Miller and Ranking Member Denson, and members of the Families and Aging Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony in support of House Bill 7, co-sponsored by Representatives White (R-Kettering) and Humphrey (D-Columbus). This bill, also known as the Strong Foundations Act, will not only help to address Ohio's infant and maternal mortality, but it is also sharply focused on improving infant/toddler services and supports for Ohio families who need it the most.

My name is Julie Stone, and I have the privilege of serving as the Executive Director of the Ohio Head Start Association. For the purposes of this testimony, when I refer to Head Start, I am referring to the Head Start preschool programs that serves 27,000 three- to five-year-old children, and the Early Head Start programs that serve 6,500 infants, toddlers and pregnant women throughout Ohio. In Ohio, the Head Start community includes sixty provider agencies, with over 8,000 staff serving children in nearly 500 licensed centers.

Because Head Start is federally funded through grants that come directly to local providers, many people are not aware of the critical role Head start plays for Ohio's zero to five population and their families. Head Start and Early Head Start provide child-centered, family focused, comprehensive community-based services to our most vulnerable children and families. That includes pregnant women, infants, toddlers and children up to age 5, whose income is less than the Federal Poverty Level, families receiving SNAP benefits, and children who are homeless, in foster care and Kinship Families. And Head Start services are uniquely available to children with disabilities and other special needs.

Head Start's proven model of comprehensive support for children and families experiencing poverty is foundational to Ohio's Early Care and Education ecosystem. It is the most successful, longest-running, national school readiness program in the United States and we provide comprehensive education, health, nutrition, dental, mental health, social services as well as parent engagement and empowerment opportunities.

We are also partners with the state as half of Ohio's Head Start provider also operate Early Childhood Education slots funded by the Ohio Department of Education, and one third operate Publicly Funded Child Care slots funded by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

Many of our 60 Head Start providers also engage in Child Care Partnerships. For example, more than one quarter of our Early Head Start moms and children are served through partnerships. The Head Start program enters into an arrangement with a community-based center or family home Child Care provider where the partner is supported with resources such as funds, highly qualified staff, technical assistance, coaching, supplies and/or materials to provide services that comply with the Head Start Program Performance Standards.

Because Head Start operate with the requirement to assess and meet unique local community needs, Head Start and Early Head Start services are provided in a variety of settings including centers, family child care, and sometimes the child's own home. The federal to local grants are administered by Community Action Agencies, Private and Public Non-Profits, School Systems, and Universities. Our programs also engage parents or other key family members in positive relationships, with a focus on family wellbeing. Head Start parents participate in leadership roles, including having a voice in program operations.

We urge you to invest in Ohio's young children and leverage Head Start to build more quality capacity to support the unique needs of infants and toddlers by investing in Early Head Start by:

- Allowing continuous Medicaid coverage for children ages three and younger who were previously deemed eligible.
- Investing in Early Head Start by supporting the Resiliency Grant Pilot Program. This pilot will support the development of quality comprehensive care in communities with a prioritization of Appalachian, rural, urban and other communities where there are high rates of infant mortality and shortages of access to quality child care to serve more infants, toddlers and their families at risk of or engaged in the child welfare or foster care systems.
- Establish an alternative pathway for Head Start and Early Head Start in the Step Up to Quality system by allowing reciprocity for Head Start and Early Head Start and contracted family child care partners that are complying with Head Start Program Performance Standards at a level of quality that exceeds the Step Up to Quality's definition of high quality. Creating a practical alternative pathway for Head Start and NAEYC Accredited centers into SUTQ would save money and time by reducing the administrative burden on programs and the state.
- Designating the Early Head Start Home-Based option as an approved home visiting model in Ohio. Head Start and in particular Early Head Start are recognized as the gold standard of comprehensive, multi-generational, family centered early childhood services and as foundational to Ohio's Early Care and Education ecosystem among administration, legislature, state bureaucracy, and partners, yet Early Head Start is not an approved home visiting model in the state. The Early Head Start Home-Based option is designated as an approved model for Maternal, Infant and Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) funding by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Approving Early Head Start Home Visiting as a state approved model will position the state to leverage Early Head Start resources and relationships to ensure access to comprehensive and innovative Infant/Toddler services for Ohio families.

We must build a stronger foundation for Ohio's children. The lack of investment in our state's young children and child care leaves Ohio's young children behind and jeopardizes our future workforce. We have all heard the statistics that only 38% of Ohio kindergartners entering the classroom ready to learn, and only 38% of Ohio students proficient in 8th grade math. Ohio's workforce readiness is in jeopardy.

Given these numbers, it should be no surprise to any of us that most children aren't ready to learn given that only about half of eligible low-income children ages 0-5 under 200% of the Federal Poverty Level are able to access any state funded child care, preschool or Head Start. We must find ways to increase access to services and supports. Our young children and our future workforce are counting on you.

Head Start has a long and deep history of commitment to quality, and has a proven track record of achieving positive outcomes for Ohio's children and families in greatest need. Our role as a foundation of the state's Early Care and Education system is crucial to the success of all of Ohio's children and we stand ready to find ways to build on the strength of our foundation on that behalf.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. Please reach out to me if you have any questions about the content of this testimony.

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