



OHIO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

HB 583 – Group Homes
Sponsor Testimony
Representative Andrea White

Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Denson, and members of the House Families and Aging Committee, thank you for allowing us to come and testify on Substitute House Bill 583. This bill is about ensuring children placed in foster group homes are receiving safe, stable, supportive care by making certain that appropriate standards and accountability are in place and enforced for Ohio's group home providers. This legislation has been crafted to address a myriad of issues revolving around the quality of care and level of supervision of children that have been raised to both Representative Plummer and I by community members throughout Montgomery County, including leaders from our cities and townships, our schools, our children's hospital and local law enforcement.

Currently, in the State of Ohio, there are 220 group homes. At last count, seventy-eight of these are in Montgomery County, with 73 of those in the City of Dayton. In other words, more than a third of the group homes in the state are located in the city and county I represent, while the majority of our counties have either no foster care group homes or way too few to serve the children under the care of their children's services agency. Comparatively, there are only 14 group homes in Franklin County, even though there are twice as many people. Cuyahoga County has a mere 11.

Our number one priority needs to be our children who are in need of a temporary, caring, safe and stable environment. We all know there is a placement crisis for youth in our state, for both youth who come into the foster care system through either the juvenile justice system or because of abuse, neglect, substance use disorders or very difficult circumstances in their families. We simply don't have enough family foster homes, group homes or residential treatment facilities.

Ohio currently has approximately 14,800 children in foster care, yet there are only just over 7,100 licensed family homes to meet this need. Of the 14,800 children, 8,179 live in licensed foster homes. An additional 4,177 live in kinship homes and approximately 2,040 children live in congregated care, including group homes.

This placement crisis has led to foster youth being housed on the couches of children's services offices, hospital emergency rooms or inpatient beds and other places for days, weeks or longer. It has also led to foster youth from all over the state being sent to Montgomery County because of the sheer volume of homes in our county and the lack of facilities in other parts of the state.

We know that there is work going on throughout the state to secure more family foster homes as the top priority, including more highly skilled therapeutic homes for the growing number of youth with very significant mental health and behavioral needs. We appreciate the leadership of the staff at the Department of Children and Youth and others who are doing that work. However, our current situation in Ohio is that we have children who have already experienced significant trauma being placed many

miles and many counties away from where their parents or caregivers live because there is a shortage of places in their home communities.

We want to point out that we know there are many group home providers and professionals in Ohio who are doing things right, providing the high level of support and the safe, stable environment children in their care need. However, we are increasingly hearing from leaders across multiple sectors in our county who are questioning the level of supervision, wraparound services, activities and supports many of these children are receiving on a day-to-day basis at some of these locations.

Local service providers and community leaders including courts, schools, medical professionals and law enforcement professionals report difficulty in reaching group home providers as well as out-of-county case workers who represent the agencies providing guardianship, and permission granting for the children. This creates significant delays in children receiving care and appropriate intervention. Additionally, in just the City of Dayton alone, law enforcement has had over 1,000 calls for service to the children's group homes in the first five months of 2024, with 2023 calls topping out close to 3,000 for the year.

We want to ensure that providers running these homes and the on-site caregivers who support the foster children in their care are properly trained, responsive and accountable for delivering the level of care they are being paid significant dollars for and entrusted to provide for some of our most vulnerable young lives.

That is why we have introduced House Bill 583. At the beginning of the process of putting this legislation together, Rep. Plummer and I held an interested parties meeting with about 20 participants from many different agencies and organizations around the state. And we have listened to many in our local community share specific stories and concerns, as well as other organizations who've reached out since we filed our placeholder bill back in May.

As a result, HB 583 now includes the following components:

- Raising the minimum training requirements for staff and providers of group homes and providing targeted intervention training and supports.
- Requiring full background checks for all staff employed by group home provider
- Creating time standards for juvenile group home providers and custodial children's services agencies to respond to hospitals upon contact so that proper authorization of care for children is received and children ready to return home are picked up.
- Requiring the Department of Children and Youth (DCY) or Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (ODMHAS) to be notified by a hospital when a foster child has an emergency department visit or inpatient admission for an injury or mental health need. Additionally, these visits or admissions will require a mandatory review of the child's placement, including its appropriateness and level of care, by the custodial children's services agency.
- Requiring law enforcement to notify the custodial children's services agency when there is an interaction with a foster child in their care and to notify DCY for every incident where a police report is generated.
- Creating guidelines to ensure juveniles charged with serious offenses who are placed by courts into the custody of children's services rather than being detained are housed in group homes specifically designated and qualified to serve these children, instead of being mixed in homes with children placed in foster care for other reasons.
- Specifying that group home providers must notify communities that they are establishing their business and demonstrate they have met all local zoning requirements and approvals prior to

moving forward on their applications for licensures with DCY and Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. Additionally, providers must maintain compliance with local zoning regulations in order to maintain their license.

- Providing DCY and ODMHAS with the ability to immediately suspend a group home operator's license in urgent situations, and requiring the agencies to review and revise as needed their license revocation standards to improve accountability.
- Providing townships with the ability to revoke a conditional use permit when zoning standards are not met – currently they don't have this ability.
- Requiring DCY to establish a formal complaint and incident reporting process regarding concerns with specific group homes that is clearly communicated and understood, with documented response processes and timelines.
- Tasking DCY with exploring ways to create incentives to help attract group homes in communities where there is urgent need, and setting standards to ensure children are not placed so far from their home communities and families.
- Requiring group home operators to provide schools with sufficient background information on students in foster group homes at the time of enrollment to enable them to understand and meet student needs.
- Ensuring the enrolling school district conducts a screening with the student to assess appropriate services and interventions that will be needed. The school district will be responsible for sharing the recommendations from this screening with the foster care givers and the custodial agency.
- Requiring the custodial agency to inform the group home operator of any criminal charges or interaction with the juvenile justice system that resulted in a juvenile court's foster placement of the child with children's services.
- And finally, tasking DCY with exploring ways to create incentives to help attract group homes in communities where there is urgent need, and setting standards to ensure children are not placed so far from their home communities and families.

We realize this is a tall order given the urgent issues facing our children, as well as the agencies who seek to serve them with integrity and care. But the time is now to raise the bar – and the amount of resources devoted to helping Ohio's children in our foster care system heal and thrive to their fullest God-given potentials.

Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Denson, and members of the House Families and Aging Committee, thank you again for allowing us to testify. We can answer any questions you may have.