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Joint Sponsor Testimony

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Good afternoon, Chairman Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and esteemed members of the Finance 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 thank my joint sponsor, Representative White, for her hard work and dedication to this critical cause.

The Strong Foundations Act is legislation for our children and, ultimately, the future of our state. With this bill, my colleague and I aim to make Ohio a place where women and families feel supported and to ensure that every child in Ohio, regardless of their location, has the opportunity to succeed.

Unfortunately, according to Groundwork Ohio's Early Childhood Dashboard, Ohio's statistics are concerning compared to other states. Ohio has almost twice as many newborn babies sent to the NICU, a higher infant mortality rate, a higher number of maternal deaths, and a greater number of women diagnosed with postpartum depression. These trends have either worsened or remained the same over the past three years in Ohio, making it clear that urgent action is needed.

After analyzing these trends, we've concluded that Ohio needs to find a way to support children and babies both before and after birth. This is why Representative White and I developed a comprehensive approach to address these challenges and make Ohio a better place for childbirth and raising a family.

HB 7 will cover several crucial areas, including addressing infant and maternal mortality rates, improving health outcomes, enhancing mental health support, expanding pre- and postnatal healthcare access, and strengthening early intervention programs. My

colleague provided a thorough overview of the bill, so I won't delve into details here. However, I'd like to highlight a few key aspects of the bill that excite me the most.

Firstly, this legislation will fund early Head Start programs through a pilot initiative focusing on urban, rural, and Appalachian communities. These areas experience higher infant mortality rates and lower access to quality pre-K programs like Head Start. According to the case study I mentioned earlier, 62% of children in Ohio aren't kindergarten-ready, and over 80% of Ohio babies from low-income families lack access to early learning programs. This pilot will allocate \$6 million to establish quality early Head Start programs and include a two-year resiliency grant for wraparound services. Our aim is to ensure that all Ohio children, regardless of their family's income or location, have access to quality educational services, setting them on a path to success.

Secondly, as many of you may know, I am a strong advocate for housing reform, and this legislation seeks to increase access to safe, stable, and quality housing for pregnant women. We will achieve this by expanding access to the "Healthy Beginnings at Home" program, which enjoys the support of the governor and is included in the state budget. Statistics show that kindergarteners of color and economically disadvantaged children are disproportionately affected by homelessness. Given the challenges stemming from inflation and the post-pandemic landscape, it's vital that we support our youth and low-income families. As mentioned several times today, we are adopting a multi-faceted approach to address childhood issues in Ohio. Child poverty is a significant concern in our state, leading to problems such as food insecurity, reduced school performance, and higher exposure to ACEs. With this bill, we aim to expand services to ensure that every child in Ohio, regardless of their parent's economic status, has the tools and opportunities needed to succeed.

This legislation will also expand medical-legal partnerships for mothers by allocating \$1 million each fiscal year, administered by the Ohio Department of Health. These funds will support competitive grants for pilot programs aimed at expanding legal service partnerships between medical providers and legal aid organizations. This initiative will help resolve social determinants of health and increase mothers' participation in prenatal care, ensuring that women have adequate access to legal advocacy in areas such as housing, food security, domestic violence, and more.

In conclusion, children and, more specifically, babies in Ohio deserve our unwavering support and the opportunity to succeed. I would be remiss if I did not mention the excellent aspects of our bill that the house staff and finance committee advocated for in this year's state budget, such as Continuous Medicaid enrollment for children aged 0 to 3 years, even if the family experiences income changes. However, this is only part of the solution; we have much work ahead, and I am eager to collaborate with the members of this committee on this critical issue. Thank you all for allowing HB 7 to be heard today.

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