

Wednesday, April 11, 2018
Ohio Senate
Government Oversight and Reform Committee
Testimony on Amended HB 137

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Chairman Blessing, Vice Chair Reineke, Ranking Member Clyde, and members of the committee, thank you so much for the opportunity to offer testimony on Amended House Bill 137.

My name is Lisa Dickson. I am here on behalf of two organizations. The OHIO Youth Advisory Board represents foster care youth, ages 14 and older. The board exists to ensure that youth voice is included in policies and practices that impact foster care youth, including group homes and residential facilities. ACTION Ohio is an alumni group of adults who experienced foster care personally, and who are dedicated to improving outcomes for the next generation. Our two groups have been working together since 2006 to make a difference, side-by-side.

Every state has in our nation has statutes identifying professionals that have frequent contact with children and teenagers and requiring them to be mandated reporters - but Ohio is the only state that doesn't include police officers on the list. This is an unfortunate oversight, because police officers are in a unique position to intervene and help in the life of a teen or child. For example, if a police officer is called to intervene in a domestic situation, they might see something that leads them to suspect that abuse is taking place – if they take the time to report their suspicions to Children's Services, this might ultimately end up saving that child or teen's life.

Speaking as a former foster youth myself, who experienced physical abuse as a child, for many years without intervention, I strongly support this bill. I, and many of our members, can testify from personal experience that physical abuse comes with a feeling of powerless. It doesn't just make you feel incredibly unsafe – it makes you feel invisible. To experience abuse without intervention from the adults in their lives gives children and teens a scary message about their worth and what to expect from other people.

The PCSAO Factbook states that the #1 reason that children and teens enter foster care in the state of Ohio is physical abuse. Now, let's think about the children and teens who aren't being counted or included in that number, because their abuse has not been reported by caring adults. What about them? How long will they continue to experience abuse without intervention?

Sadly, throughout the state of Ohio, in every legislative district, there are children and teenagers who - right now at this very moment - are being physically abused. We care about and deeply appreciate Ohio police officers - that's why we need them on our team to develop a stronger safety net for vulnerable youth in Ohio.

Again, we value our police, and recognize that some officers are taking the time to report abuse already. This next step forward is about "level setting" – getting everyone on the same page, in order to provide consistency. Every child or teen who is being abused matters.

I urge you to pass this bill. Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions.

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