

Tuesday, January 25, 2022

Article 3

Child Abuse Reporting Bill Clears Senate Committee

Legislation designed to strengthen the child abuse reporting system was teed up for a floor vote in the upper chamber.

The measure (**HB 4**) cleared the **Senate Judiciary** Committee Tuesday in a unanimous vote.

Among the provisions in the bill is language requiring counties to review memoranda of understanding with Public Children Services Agencies.

It also requires a public children services agency that receives a report of child abuse or neglect to notify the appropriate law enforcement agency in accordance with the county's MOU requirements on sharing information between a PCSA and law enforcement agency.

In the House, the bill picked up a provision to create an ombudsman office for the state's foster care system and language to expand the pool of qualified home study assessors for that system.

The legislation earned praise from the Children's Defense Fund Ohio, with Kim Eckhart highlighting a provision to create a youth ombudsman, calling it "a beacon of hope for youth who experienced maltreatment and found that the current child welfare system failed to protect them."

However, she called for lawmakers to strengthen the language.

"I would be remiss if I did not elevate the voice of at least one young advocate who has said that without appropriate funding, this office is set up to fail," she said. "The current funding structure makes the youth ombudsman entirely dependent on the Department of Job and Family Services because it does not have its own appropriation authority by the legislature. I urge you to establish clear appropriation authority to fund this effort in the next biennial budget."

Ms. Eckhart told **Sen. Cecil Thomas** (D-Cincinnati) that a child would be able to make a complaint directly to the youth ombudsman.

The panel also received proponent testimony from two representatives of ACTION Ohio, including Juliana Barton, who said she suffered abuse at the hands of her father for 17 years.

"It would take a brutal assault that left me severely injured before I was finally removed from my father's care," she wrote. "The prolonged abuse I experienced significantly impacted my life, leading me to struggle for many years after I aged out of the foster care system. However, I eventually found healing and purpose by sharing my story to inspire change and help prevent others from enduring the same trauma I experienced as a child."

Kristi Burre, director of the Governor's Children's Initiative, provided written proponent testimony in which she said **Gov. Mike DeWine** has long prioritized children's safety.

"Immediately upon taking office, he created the Governor's Children's Initiative and tasked it with coordinating and aligning the state's children's programming, advancing policy and innovation within the state's children's programs, and providing supportive services for Ohio's most in-need children and families," she wrote.

The proposal was inspired by the death of 10-year-old Takoda Collins in 2019 after years of abuse.

Sen. Niraj Antani (R-Miamisburg) said the Montgomery County child fell through the cracks of the system and that the bill will help to prevent future tragedies.
