



Testimony for the Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services On Custody Relinquishment and Multi-System Youth

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Chairman Romanchuk, Ranking Member West, members of the Health and Human Services Subcommittee of the House Finance Committee, I am Gayle Channing Tenenbaum. I have been an Advocate for Children, Youth and Families for more than 52 years. I began as a caseworker in Child Welfare, worked for the Public Children Services Association of Ohio for 35 years and now work for The Center for Community Solutions on Behavioral Health Issues for Children, Youth and Families.

I am very honored to be here with a panel of parents and young people who know firsthand the devastation of a practice we call custody relinquishment. Custody relinquishment is when families, even caring engaged families, have to relinquish custody of their child to the state in order for that child to get the services they need. These people are here to share their own personal stories with you, and to support funding for a Crisis Intervention Fund for Multi-System Youth, in order to prevent some children or young people from being removed from their families and to prevent the process of custody relinquishment in the State of Ohio.

Concern about multi-system youth accelerated dramatically a few years ago. State systems that serve Ohio's children and families became increasingly concerned about the number of parents who relinquished custody of their children to children's services in order to secure services and supports they and their children were unable to access any other way. Many of these are engaged, caring families who were doing their best to care for their child but were unable to afford or access the services their children needed and, as a last resort, relinquished custody to the state. Parents, advocates, policy makers and practitioners (much as you see here today) joined together to explore possible solutions to this. What resulted was a set of recommendations in HB 49:337, developed by a joint legislative committee under the leadership of Senator Randy Gardner and Representative Sarah LaTourette.

The official recommendations defined multi-system youth as those involved in **two or more** of our state's systems: Child protective services, juvenile justice, behavioral health and developmental disabilities. In addition, many of these young people have experienced significant levels of trauma. The committee recommendations focus on youth whose challenges

rise to such a high level that no single system can adequately address their physical, emotional, behavioral and developmental concerns. In these circumstances a highly coordinated, multi-system treatment plan is needed to avert custody relinquishment or unnecessary out-of-home placement. These plans include things like mobile crisis response, intensive home-based and community-based treatments, respite and stabilization.

Ohio is not alone in addressing this challenge. Recent studies note that:

- At least 13 percent of youth ages 8 to 15 years old have a diagnosable mental health condition that causes severe impairment of their day-to-day lives, that number jumps to 21 percent for young people ages 13 through 18 years old.
- Nearly 85 percent of all screened youth in Child Protective Services screened positive of a diagnosable mental health condition.
- 70 percent of youth in the juvenile justice system have a diagnosable mental health disorder.
- Studies have documented that between 30 and 50 percent of children and adolescents with Intellectual Disability (ID) have co-occurring mental health disorders or challenging behavior. Very high rates of co-occurring emotional disorders are also found among children with developmental disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorders (41-70 percent), Cerebral Palsy and Epilepsy, even among those who have normal intellectual levels.

The committee report recommended specific actions for the state that, if implemented, can reduce custody relinquishment and unnecessary out of home placements. These recommendations are summarized here:

Committee Recommendations

1. Improve data collection and sharing related to multi-system youth to inform state and local decision-making capabilities
2. Ensure youth and families have access to peer-support and peer-mentor programs with a consistent funding source
3. Establish a safety net of state-level funding for multi-system youth
4. Ensure youth with moderate to severe needs have access to a High-Fidelity Wraparound service
5. Modernize Family and Children First Councils
6. Create a Children's Congregate Care Study Committee

Our dedicated coalition members are here today not only out of sense of urgency but also one of hope. We are grateful that the needs of these youth and their families have been recognized by the Legislature and the administration. We believe that with the necessary funding and infrastructure, Ohio can end the practice of custody relinquishment and unnecessary out-of-home placements and pave the way for these vulnerable youth and families to stay together, thrive, and achieve the best level of health and wellness possible. There are many encouraging signs that indicate our hope is justified, such as:

- The administration's commitment to children, youth and families: prevention, crisis and treatment
- Cabinet-level coordination through the Office of Children's Initiatives
- Dedicated resources to support Child Protective Services
- Dedicated resources for expansion of behavioral health and developmental disabilities prevention, treatment and crisis response capacity
- Continuing education and implementation of trauma-informed care
- Family First Prevention Services Act
- Dedicated resources to multi-system youth initiative
- Family and Children First modernization

We also know that to accomplish our goals, we must have **dedicated, flexible** funding that provides crisis intervention for multi-system youth that prevents children coming into custody and ends custody relinquishment.

Thank you for your time. I know you are anxious to hear from our panel. I would be happy to try and answer any questions you might have both now and after they speak. Panel members are listed below in the order they are speaking.

Mark Butler
 Rebecca McGovern
 Jill Koenig, PEP Connections
 Julie Callahan
 Jerry Freewalt
 Tamisha McKenzie