



Ashtabula County Children Services

"It takes a community for a child to grow."

**24 HOUR
ABUSE HOTLINE**

440-998-1811 or
1-888-998-1811

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Executive Director

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May 9, 2023

Senate Health Committee

HB33 Testimony

Aimee Clemson-Rich, Ashtabula County Children Services Board, START Ongoing Caseworker

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Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Health Committee, my name is Aimee Clemson. I am an Ohio START caseworker at Ashtabula County Children Services and I am also a recovered addict. I am before you today, as I have made it my life's mission to help the children and families whose lives are directly affected by the opioid and methamphetamine epidemic. I am on the frontlines, protecting the children, while holding their parent's hand in a battle of life and death. I try to lead by way of example and hope, while directing my clients towards a pathway of healing and recovery. I do this because I know there are only two potential outcomes with this disease... the prognosis is terrifyingly simple, they get better, or they die.

May I serve as an example that the disease of addiction does not discriminate. I was brought up in a two parent, upper middle class, deeply loving home. My parents imparted strict Christian values upon my sister and myself and we both knew that our potentials were limitless if we put in hard work.

I spent the first decade of my adult life raising four amazing children and excelling in my radio career. Driven to be a woman that my kids would respect and look up to, I was motivated to be a success, despite being a single mother. I quickly moved up the ladder as an on-air personality and ultimately became the driver of a morning show. But amid my biggest personal and professional accomplishments, I struggled with mental illness. It was at this point in my life when a perfectly "good girl," inadvertently turned "bad."

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In a desperate search to relive symptoms of anxiety and depression, I was prescribed and subsequently became addicted to a drug named Xanax. The escalation of my substance use dependency was so quick and debilitating that in almost no time at all, I had lost more than just material or superficial possessions. Those things could be reacquired. But gone forever was a piece of my heart, a piece of my soul, a piece of me... my son.

Every person with a substance use disorder has a bottom. This was mine: At the depths of this sickness, I found myself pregnant. I briefly managed to get clean in order to deliver a healthy baby boy. But my life was a disaster, and I knew that my son deserved better. I believed that surely there were people more worthy of this gift than myself. So, I searched the Country for parents who were everything that I was not. Then, the day I feared the most had come, May 2, 2018, his new parents rushed to my labor and delivery bedside as I brought Isaiah Ryan into this world. I watched tears of joy run down their faces, as tears of pain ran down mine. The sickness I felt placing MY son into his new mother's arms is not a hurt I can adequately put into words. It is a grief so dark, a longing so desperate and an emptiness so vast that five years later the thought of that day still brings me to my knees. But the thought that kept me selfless in that moment of relinquishment and still today is this: "I will break my heart forever, a million times over, to never have to break my child's heart.

For the next year I was on a mission to self-destruct, I hated myself, the grief felt endless. However, the love I had for ALL my children was just enough to keep me on this side of the ground, long enough for help to arrive.

The memory of Ashtabula County Children Services knocking at my door is something a mother does not forget. Not wanting to face who was on the other side, afraid of the judgement, petrified of losing the only thing that I had left to live for, my children, a force greater than myself pushed me to turn the doorknob and face the consequences. Standing there were two women, (to this day refer to as my living angels), sent to answer my prayers; to help me when I could not help myself; to take care of my children, when I could not take care of them myself; to love me when I could not love myself.

They explained to me a new program called START, which is an acronym for "Sobriety Treatment and Reducing Trauma." They detailed how they would assist me in getting the substance abuse treatment that I desperately needed, while assuring me that if I followed treatment plan recommendations, I would

not have to lose my children. Not trusting that they truly cared about me, believing I was just another case file number, and the way they earned their paycheck, I reluctantly signed the contract. After all, I was in no position to decline their offer, I was desperate for help.

Getting better did not come easy. In fact, it's typically a process of failing, falling, getting back up and trying again, repeat, repeat, repeat. The persistence and support I received from my Children Services Caseworker and her Supervisor meant the difference between life or death. It would have been easier to take my children and close my case. But they did not take the path of least resistance. They took the hard path of compassion, empathy and faith in a painstaking process of saving a person with a substance use disorder. Not only do I thank them, but my children also do... as they have been saved from experiencing a trauma of having to bury their mother.

This entire journey has been everything from moments of excruciating heartaches to times of incredible joy and fulfillment. From feeling like I cannot go on, to feeling like there's a reason I am alive. I began working at Ashtabula County Children Services as a Family Peer Mentor in May of last year. Having the opportunity to work beside the women that saved my life, Caseworker, Dana Berry and Supervisor, Ann Lynch; they were able to witness firsthand the woman they built back up. When I was asked to submit my resume for a START caseworker opening and was hired, it was the first time that I felt I had overcome my label of "addict." They didn't see me as the person I was, they saw me as the person that I am.

Each day I awake I am deeply grateful for the people at Ashtabula County Children Services who helped turn this "bad girl" back to good." As a direct result of their unwavering support and guidance I have been able to turn the most painful experience of my life into my purpose. I get to be that person on the other side of the door, to guide, to support, to advocate for, to believe in, to empower. I get to pay it forward. I get to teach birthmothers that we ARE strong enough to make the decision that is best for our children, even when it doesn't align with what our hearts innately want. Even when it feels like it will kill us. We CAN recover and we DO recover. May my labors in this life continue to illustrate that.

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As I stand here today, I passionately advocate on a wide scale for greater understanding and public policy that sees beyond the disease, destigmatizes addiction, and makes a true difference in the lives of suffering families. Specifically in children services, we need more supportive, educated caseworkers who see the person for who they CAN be and not what they struggle with, because every life matters. The workforce crisis mentioned earlier is real. I see firsthand the people that I work with, they are emotionally, mentally, and physically burned out. I speak for many of us at the agency when I say, “We need to be able to give more of our time and attention to the people that have the potential to turn their lives around.” But it is impossible to individually devote our care to each family when we are drowning in cases.... Simply put, there are not enough workers for the number of intakes that could benefit from programs like START. Having to turn down cases that we know could benefit, can prove to be tragic for families and fatal for the addicted. I know for myself, if I hadn’t had that opportunity, I would not be before you today. I want every parent to be able to have the chance that I had.

That is why investing in Children Services is so critical- it makes a difference. Ohio START is now in 54 Ohio counties with plans to expand in two ways over the next biennium: by adding 15 counties and by adding staff to existing programs so they can serve more families. Ohio is a national leader for the START program; Brown County is the first jurisdiction in the country to obtain program certification, Butler County is currently undergoing the certification process, and through PCSAO efforts, the state will soon be certified. As you consider important funding decisions in the budget, please ensure that Ohio START is fully funded. (More than half of Ohio START’s budget exists in Ohio MHAS Line Item 33642I, Continuum of Care Services, which was reduced by 10% in the House. We ask for this line item to be restored to Executive Budget levels so that the Ohio START program can expand as planned.)

You have the opportunity to continue to transform lives like you have mine. I personally give you my deepest respect and gratitude. Thank you. I am happy to answer any questions.