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Cheryl Subler, Executive Director

**House Finance Committee**

House Bill 96 – Interested Party Testimony

Jack Everson, Ross County Commissioner

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Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the child protective system. My name is Jack Everson. I'm a Ross County Commissioner and serve on the Board of the County Commissioners Association of Ohio (CCAO).

County commissioners are the budgetary authority for the counties. It is our responsibility to ensure public dollars are spent appropriately and allocate them to the various officeholders and departments. In most counties, the public children services agency (PCSA) is combined with the county job and family services agency, a department under the commissioners' umbrella. In others, an independent children services board appointed by the county commissioners is the county PCSA.

We are facing a statewide crisis in our child welfare system, with a lack of appropriate and affordable placement options to meet the needs of the children we serve. This crisis has resulted in skyrocketing costs for room and board for youth in custody – an increase of 68% over the last five years, well outpacing inflation. In the same time frame, the number of youth in paid placements dropped by 9%.

For many years, the responsibility for funding the lion's share of placement costs and the operation of the PCSA has fallen to the counties. Counties fund PCSAs and placement through a mix of county general fund dollars and voted property tax levies.

Ross County is a member of one of two multi-county job and family service agencies in the State of Ohio. South Central Ohio Job and Family Services comprises Ross, Hocking, and Vinton counties. The cost of care in our three-county area has increased by 252%, from \$3,993,000 in 2015, to \$10,083,000 in 2024. In Ross County, the cost has been higher, at 265%, from \$2,395,000 in 2015 to \$6,343,000 in 2024.

Even having property tax levies in each of the three counties, specifically for child welfare cost of care, the commissioners have had to budget additional funds from the general revenue fund. The issue is not an increase in the number of children in care, as we have averaged 185 kids per month in care across the three counties for the past ten years, but rather in the complexity and severity of needs our children are displaying when they enter agency custody. Our agency, like many across the state, is also experiencing a decrease in the number of IV-E eligible children and thus a decrease in federal reimbursement for placement costs.



CCAO supports the continuation of the state-county partnership regarding placement costs proposed in the Department of Children and Youth's budget. The additional \$55 million in the State Child Protection Allocation over the biennium will help counties respond to the steep increases we are facing. Additionally, DCY is proposing policy changes to provide transparency in provider rates, which is a positive step in providing more stability in our budgeting. We support this multipronged approach to addressing this crisis.

Youth with high acuity needs are entering agency custody more often, and it is difficult to find appropriate placement options. HB 96 includes funding for regional child wellness campuses, which would provide short-term crisis stabilization services for youth with complex needs and provide the agency with additional information and time to secure the best placement option.

At the end of the day, these are our kids and they become our adults. They deserve to have quality care. I fear with the system as it is today, we are too often falling way too short of this goal. Our youth get one childhood. Failing to invest properly in this system will continue to have consequences for the youth and upstream effects on our other adult centered systems for years to come.

Thank you for your time today. I would be happy to answer any questions.