

Ohio Multi-System Youth Coalition

DATE: June 20, 2019
RELEASE: IMMEDIATE
ATTENTION: News Editor

CONTACT: Gayle Channing Tenebaum
614-226-3116
gtenenb@aol.com

OHIO SENATE SEEKS TO END FORCED CUSTODY RELINQUISHMENT

COLUMBUS – The Ohio Senate Finance Committee has passed Substitute HB 166, Ohio’s operating budget for the next biennium. The bill will go to the full senate before moving into conference committee with the Ohio House. The bill as amended seeks to end the practice of forcing parents of multi-system youth to surrender custody of their children for the sole purpose of gaining access to necessary services.

The term multi-system youth refers to children and teenagers with complex behavioral, physical and developmental needs that require the assistance of multiple state and local departments and agencies. Sometimes the needs of these young people are so profound that they require services, such as out-of-home residential treatment, that are not funded by private insurance or Medicaid. This forces parents to make the heart-wrenching decision to relinquish custody of their children to their local children services agency to gain access to needed care.

State Senator Jay Hottinger (R-Newark) introduced an amendment designed to help alleviate the need for forced custody relinquishment. The legislation would create a *Multi System Youth Custody Relinquishment Fund* using \$18 million, currently in Governor DeWine’s Medicaid Budget, specifically for families facing custody relinquishment. Other language would require coordinated funding and services across state departments for families at risk of coming into custody, something that will also help end custody relinquishment.

The Ohio Multi-System Youth Coalition, a network of parents, child advocates, and service providers is praising the amendment and members of the Senate and House for working to address this issue. A panel of parents who endured custody relinquishment have testified throughout the budget process and met with elected officials to help them understand the disastrous impacts of the current practice.

“For the first time, we have support from Ohio’s Governor, House, and Senate to attack this horrible problem and specific funding that will enable us to help these families continue to support their children,” said Gayle Channing Tenebaum, Medicaid Consultant for Children and Youth, Center for Community Solutions Policy Fellow, The Voinovich School, Ohio University. “It is especially heartening to see such broad bipartisan support for these families and many champions on both sides of the aisle.”

“I’m thankful for the support of Senators Hottinger, Dolan, Burke, Thomas, Hackett, Kunze, Antonio and others who have listened to our stories and have imagined what it would be like if

Ohio Multi-System Youth Coalition

they were put into our shoes,” said Laura Bates, a parent who is currently experiencing forced custody relinquishment.

Whitehall resident Mark Butler was forced to surrender custody of his son Andrew to gain access to residential treatment for behavioral issues related to severe Autism, mental illness, and an intellectual disability. “For many years, families like mine suffered alone and in silence. It feels like someone has finally heard us,” Butler said. “Governor DeWine, Representatives Lipps, Romanchuk, and West, Senate President Obhof, Senate Minority Leader Yuko, and the Senate Finance Committee have all given me hope that the state cares about children like Andrew and has found the resolve to address this issue.”

The budget bill also calls on the Ohio Family and Children First Council to develop and present to the Ohio General Assembly, a comprehensive multi-system youth action plan to reduce forced custody relinquishment by December 31, 2019. This is the culmination of work begun by the legislature in 2016, when the Joint Legislative Committee on Multi-System Youth issued recommendations designed to stop forced custody relinquishment. That committee was chaired by former Senator Randy Gardner and former Representative Sarah LaTourette and included current Senators Lehner and Thomas and Representatives Jordan, Skindell and Boyd.

“Throughout the budget process, the administration and leadership in the Ohio General Assembly have demonstrated a level of concern for Ohio's most vulnerable children and youth that we have not seen in years,” Channing Tenebaum said.