

Testimony before the Senate Finance Committee

Re: Substitute HB 50

Suzanne Le Sure, PhD

5/24/16

Chairman Oelslager and Members of the Senate Finance Committee. I am speaking to you today on behalf of the Ohio Psychological Association, in support of Senate Bill 240, the bill that extends support to foster children over the age of 18. I am a member and past president of the Ohio Psychological Association. I am also the Clinical Director for the Northeast Ohio Chapter of "A Home Within", a national organization that supports the emotional and social development of foster children. I would like to add my voice to those supporting this important bill and to urge you to pass it out of committee as quickly as possible.

Each year for over a thousand Ohio children, turning 18 means losing financial, educational and social support. Imagine your own children

losing all family guidance and economic support at 18. For foster children, this loss is even more catastrophic. Foster children have the cards stacked against them. Often starting with a poor prenatal environment, they have survived abuse and neglect, lack of permanency and the loss of family connections. They have not had the simple childhood experiences like working to save spending money for the family vacation or making presents for loved ones at Christmas that teach long range planning and impulse control. In many cases they are actively prevented from experiences that teach independence, like learning to drive. Brain science now teaches us that these young people are not even fully developed neurologically.

Not only does science support this important bill, it is economically strategic as well. I am sure you are well familiar with the statistics:

- More than one in five will become homeless after age 18¹
- Only 58 percent will graduate high school by age 19

- 71 percent of young women are pregnant by 21
- At the age of 24, only half are employed ⁴
- Fewer than 3 percent will earn a college degree by age 25
- One in four will be involved in the justice system within two years of leaving the foster care system

The financial cost of not assisting these young people is enormous.

While some may be concerned about the cost of this bill, the cost of caring for these youth when they become pregnant, incarcerated or homeless is greater. Some estimates suggest 300,000 per youth.

For a psychologist, these numbers are faces. I have worked with foster children for almost fifty years. I have worked with children whose brains will never recover from their mother's drug use, no matter how loving the foster family. I have grieved with children who continue to hope that parents will somehow return and stubbornly refuse to allow themselves to attach to others. I have struggled to keep therapeutic

connection with children who are moved from one home to another. I have followed these children from birth families to foster care to failed adoption to residential treatment. I have seen them suicide. I have seen them age out with no supports.

With the details changed to protect his identity, I would like to describe one of the young people who is under my care right now. Jack was born to a mother with a serious mental illness and a father who was convicted of fraud. When he was in fourth grade, his house burned down and his mother took him out of the country. From 10-15, Jack lived with his mother in difficult circumstances and twice was left to live on the streets of a foreign country on his own. Miraculously, he survived, but in the process he was sexually victimized and came into the care of an international children's agency. He was repatriated to Ohio, the state of his birth and was placed in foster care. A half sibling was located and Jack was briefly reunited with family, but the sibling lost his job and so Jack was once again placed on a flight back to Ohio.

When Jack was 17, an uncle with limited economic circumstances was located and through a kinship placement was able to accept Jack into his home. The two of them are planning a simple family vacation this summer, the first Jack has ever experienced. In spite of experiencing significant trauma, having an extremely spotty educational experience and struggles with depression, Jack is now within 6 credits of high school graduation. He has strong cognitive abilities and the goal of attending an Ohio college. He has already started his application and is in contact with the college program that offers support to former foster students. However, he is about to turn 19. This summer, the uncle's lease is up. Without kinship support, the uncle cannot keep his current apartment. If he moves back to the smaller unit he occupied previously Jack will have to leave, because Department regulations require that Jack have his own bedroom. So Jack will once again be on his own. His mother left him on his own in the streets of a foreign country. Now Ohio will leave him on his own, expecting that he will overcome

depression, inadequate education, immaturity and trauma to take those last few steps alone.

Jack once told me that I had been his voice when he had no voice. I would like to be his voice now. I urge you to pass this bill out of committee as quickly as possible. Next year will be too late for many children like Jack. He is waiting.

Respectfully submitted,

Suzanne LeSure, Ph.D.