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Advocates Ask Ohio Senate to Support Children and Seniors in HB 483

"All Ohioans need to feel safe in their homes and communities. Too many children and seniors are abused, neglected and exploited across Ohio, and many counties lack the resources to keep our children and older adults safe. Advocates for Ohio's Future is working to build support in the Ohio Senate to strengthen Ohio's commitment to the protection of our seniors and children," said Mark Davis, Co-chair of Advocates for Ohio's Future.

In April, the Ohio House of Representatives passed House Bill 483, which includes \$20 million to strengthen protection for children and older adults. The House version includes:

- a \$10 million investment in adult protective services (APS) to improve the state's capacity to protect older Ohioans from abuse, neglect, and exploitation and help ensure Ohio seniors live with safety and dignity.
- \$10 million for child welfare to build on improvements and outcomes for over 100,000 children and their families—including tens of thousands of children who are victims of the opiate crisis—and address critical disparities among counties to provide child welfare services.

If passed, the adult protective services allocation would be nearly four times more than the state has ever provided for adult protective services. The child welfare funds would be the first new state child welfare dollars in nine years.

Adult Protective Services

For far too long, protection for our elders has not been given the attention it needs and deserves. Services in Ohio are underfunded, are scattered piecemeal among different agencies and are disparate depending on local resources. As Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine reported at a recent elder justice press conference, elder abuse is underreported in Ohio and nationally. DeWine quoted estimates that for every abuse incident that is reported, five more go unreported.

"Area Agencies on Aging are all-too familiar with the epidemic of elder abuse. Every day, we identify potential victims, refer cases, and provide follow-up services. While we applaud the Ohio Attorney General's office for the Elder Justice Initiative, without sufficient APS funding for all Ohio communities, the state's new efforts to combat abuse will fall short," said Beth Kowalczyk, Chief Policy and Operating Officer at the Ohio Association of Area Agencies on Aging (o4a).

A strong APS system is essential to keeping Ohio's seniors from harm and responding to incidents of abuse, neglect and exploitation. Thirty-nine Ohio counties currently do not have a full time dedicated adult protective services worker on staff. With current APS funding levels for 50 counties as low as \$2,000 year, counties either rely on unpredictable local funding, add APS duties to another staff person's workload, or provide no service at all.

Incidents of elder abuse are expected to grow as Ohio's baby boomers reach retirement age in ever-greater numbers. By 2020, the Ohio Department of Aging predicts that one in five Ohio residents will be age 60 or older. Many elder adults are casualties of the heroin and drug epidemic because addicted relatives, neighbors, or strangers rob them of money or possessions or abuse them through neglect.

In order to ensure all Ohio seniors live with safety and dignity, Advocates for Ohio's Future is asking the Senate for \$20 million—\$10 million in addition to the House investment—to strengthen the adult protective services system in every county in Ohio. Twenty million dollars ensures that every county will, at minimum, be able to have a full time staff person dedicated to APS.

Child Welfare

Last year, almost fifteen thousand children who had substance-abusing caretakers were served by Ohio's county child welfare agencies. Of these children, 7,300 were age 5 or under. Because of the difficulties of obtaining treatment for parents and the time needed for drug-related rehabilitation, these children remain in custody for far longer than children in non-drug-related cases—staying an average of 300 days in custody as compared to an average of 70 days for non-drug-related cases. This deluge of opioid-related cases is happening even as local child welfare agencies have suffered a 20% loss of state funds in the past few years.

One way to improve outcomes for children in the child welfare system is to provide flexible funding to counties. Flexible funding allows counties to be more creative and targeted in serving children and families than when funding is subject to extensive requirements. In counties with flexible funds, outcomes for “deep-end” kids or difficult-to-serve cases are better, children spend fewer days in custody, and children are adopted at a faster rate than in counties without flexible funds.

“County child welfare agencies have great success connecting children and families to local services and reaching positive outcomes for Ohio's children. We want to ensure that caseworkers statewide have the resources they need to reach successful outcomes for all children as the number of cases is growing rapidly,” said Gayle Channing Tenenbaum, Director of Policy & Governmental Affairs at Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO).

A \$20 million dollar investment in the child welfare system—\$10 million in addition to the House investment—would permit counties to hire caseworkers to work with families intensely to avoid children entering custody, or, if children must come into custody for their safety, to ensure those children are receiving the appropriate treatment while a permanency plan is being developed. Investing in the child welfare system will allow county child welfare agencies statewide to ensure that there is a permanent home and safety plan for each child served by the child welfare system.

Advocates for Ohio's Future has organized its coalition members to speak out about this opportunity to protect Ohio's seniors and children. Advocates sent letters of support to the Governor, his administration, and to Senate leaders, and organized a statewide call-in day on May 8th in support of funding for APS and child welfare. Advocates for Ohio's Future looks forward to working with the Ohio Senate to ensure that Ohio is a great place for all Ohioans to live and work in safety.