

TESTIMONY OF CHILD FOCUS
OHIO HOUSE CHILDREN AND HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE
H.B. 96
February 27, 2025

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony to you today. My name is Dr. Laura Stith, Chief Clinical Officer for Child Focus.

Who We Are

Child Focus is a nonprofit organization that strengthens the quality of life for 20,000 individuals in central and southern Ohio across 22 counties by developing thriving kids, strong families and successful adults.

In operation since 1977, Child Focus administers two main programs: Early Learning and Behavioral Health and serves at-risk children and adults who live in poverty, have family dysfunction, involvement in foster or kinship care, are impacted by the criminal justice system, and have experienced physical and verbal abuse, trauma, mental health and substance use issues.

There is a great need in the communities we serve, particularly the under resourced Appalachian region of southern Ohio, for programs that help families who are struggling. Child Focus impacts the lives of those whom we serve by responding to 2AM crisis hotline calls and mobile crisis runs; providing high quality child care, supporting law enforcement and individuals in the jails and juvenile detention and providing “just in time” emergency mental health treatment to individuals on the brink of suicide. However, Child Focus’ continued work is reliant upon having adequate resources to maintain these programs and to serve even more families.

Getting Results

We are grateful to the Ohio General Assembly for appropriating \$500,000 in Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025 through a TANF Block Grant earmark and a \$500,000 General Revenue Fund earmark in Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025 through the Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS). These federal state appropriated dollars went to Child Focus’ Strong Families program and the results of this investment were life changing.

With the help of these appropriations, Child Focus was able to serve 815 families (1,636 children and 1,137 caregivers) in Clermont, Brown, Adams, Highland, and Hamilton Counties. This program has often been the catalyst to keep these large families, mostly children, together and out of foster care or homelessness and to stabilize them financially and as a family unit by keeping adults working or receiving training for a better job.

The program formula is simple, based on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, and is laser-focused on family stability and well-being, economic mobility and self-sufficiency. We use TANF funds to remove job or homelessness barriers and provide evidence-based, in-home Parenting services to stabilize the family unit because healthy family functioning is arguably one of the most influential contributors of healthy child development. Our TANF program reinforces long-term family self-sufficiency by providing job development services including technical or trade skill credentialing.

We are proud of the work we have done. Historically we have only been able to serve families who have open cases with Child Protective Services (CPS). TANF has allowed us to serve families who need help before their children are in CPS custody or are homeless. We are wrapping up our fourth year of programming with a waitlist of more than 10 families, comprised of 23 children and 14 adults. Domestic and Juvenile Courts, law enforcement, Job and Family services are begging us to expand.

Building Upon Success

I am asking this committee to support an amendment to H.B. 96 that we have been working on with Rep. Jean Schmidt that would appropriate \$1 million in each fiscal year through the TANF Block Grant Earmark and \$1 million in GRF each fiscal year through ODJFS. These appropriations would allow Child Focus to increase the number of families served in our game changing Strong Families Program. These dollars would also allow us to expand our 13 Job Navigators and Parent Educators.

The TANF Block Grant earmark dollars we are requesting will help fund the types of programs that the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program was designed to address. These dollars will assist families with children when the parents or other responsible relatives cannot provide for the family's basic needs. It will help needy families end dependency on government benefits and encourage stability and self-sufficiency for STRONG families.

Furthermore, the flexible GRF dollars will support Child Focus' early learning and behavioral health services for at risk youth. Child Focus has used this flexible funding to provide an income-based sliding fee scale for families making access to care affordable for families who would otherwise not seek services; increased therapeutic and crisis spaces and supplies, before and after school scholarships for K-5th grade, evidence-based practice for working with families with mental health and substance use disorders and basic need assistance for families who do not qualify for TANF and transportation assistance to and from services.

Why This Matters

Our commitment to improve the lives of Ohio's most vulnerable citizens is heartfelt and that commitment starts at the top with our President and CEO, Pamela Lindeman, who was in the public child welfare system through age 7. She credits the Hamilton County Department of Job and Family Services for the "life-changing" care and opportunity she was given. This experience inspired her to give back by entering the social work field, earning a Bachelor's of Social Work degree from the University of Cincinnati and a Master's degree in Community Mental Health from Xavier University. She completed her clinical residency at Child Focus and in 2019 became CEO, where each day she enjoys the opportunity to provide hope to others who find themselves facing similar circumstances that she also faced as a young girl.

Your support for this amendment will help improve the lives of families and at-risk children. We would love to share individual success stories about how we have helped stabilize children and families; parents become productive members of the workforce; lowered dependence on government programs; and increased quality of life outcomes.

Chair White and members of the committee, we urge your support for this amendment request. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.