

Testimony of

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Chairman McDermott, Ohio Representative Tiberi and members of the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony for the Hearings to Review Responsible Fatherhood Programs. Ohio was honored to be described as an exemplary fatherhood programs by David Hansell, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, before the Subcommittee on June 17, 2010. On behalf of the state of Ohio and as the Executive Director of the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood, I submit this written testimony to provide additional details and information about the work and impact of the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood (OCF). The Ohio Commission on Fatherhood's mission is to improve the well being of Ohio's children by strengthening responsible fatherhood in local Ohio communities.

Governed by Statute

Ohio is one of the only states in the nation with a statewide fatherhood commission created by statute.¹ In 2000, then House Representative Peter Lawson Jones, (Cuyahoga County) authored the legislation to create the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood in the state's 2000-2001 biennial budget.² Organizationally, the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood is funded through the Governor's Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives. Ohio Governor Ted Strickland has strengthened the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood's work by funding the Ohio Fatherhood Initiative and appointing an Executive Director and staff to implement the Commission's work.

¹ Ohio Revised Code § 5101.34 et. seq.

² Peter Lawson Jones currently serves as Chairman, the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood.

Structure of the Commission

The Ohio Commission on Fatherhood is composed of twenty Commissioners. The Ohio Revised code sets forth statutorily required Commission members from all three branches of government:

(1)(a) Four members of the house of representatives appointed by the speaker of the house, not more than two of whom are members of the same political party.

(b) Two members of the senate appointed by the president of the senate, each from a different political party.

(2) The governor, or the governor's designee;

(3) One representative of the judicial branch of government appointed by the chief justice of the supreme court;

(4) The directors of health, job and family services, rehabilitation and correction, alcohol and drug addiction services, and youth services and the superintendent of public instruction, or their designees;

(5) One representative of the Ohio family and children first cabinet council created under section 121.37 of the Revised Code appointed by the chairperson of the council;

(6) Five representatives of the general public with extensive experience in issues related to fatherhood who the governor appoints.

By bringing these diverse perspectives to the table the Commission seeks to address the father absence problem through collaboration and by developing holistic solutions.

Purpose of the Commission

Per Ohio Revised Code subsection 5101.342, the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood has four primary statutory responsibilities:

1) Fund Fatherhood Programs. Since 2008, the Commission has awarded almost four million dollars to fund nineteen fatherhood programs throughout the state. These fatherhood programs provide direct services and have served over 4,397 fathers. The grantees were selected through a competitive application process that identified programs with innovative and effective approaches to reducing father absence. The focus of these programs include building father parenting skills, providing employment services to low income and non-custodial fathers, preventing premature fatherhood, providing services to incarcerated fathers to reconcile with their families, and increasing public awareness of critical roles fathers play.

2) Develop Policy Recommendations. Father absence is one of the most challenging social problems in society today. The Ohio Commission on Fatherhood makes law and policy recommendations to the Ohio state legislature, state agencies and the federal government to promote responsible fatherhood. President Obama stated, “Government should make it easier for fathers to be involved in their children's lives, not harder.” The OCF legislative staff has met with every member or the staff of the Ohio Congressional delegation, and the Ohio General Assembly to brief them on the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood’s work and to make recommendations on pending legislation.

3) Engage the Community: The Ohio Commission on Fatherhood participates in and sponsors fatherhood-related programs, conferences, symposiums and other forums to increase public awareness of the central role fathers play in their children’s lives. As Executive Director, I often delivers keynote addresses and meet with interested community members because engaging communities is essential to our Commission’s work. Community conversations result in more engaged fathers. Involved fathers positively affect the social, behavioral, psychological and cognitive outcomes of children. Fathers are the source of family and economic stability so they need to become part of the conversation.

OCF has created a Fatherhood Commitment pin and pledge in which a father promises, “As a Responsible Father, I commit to spend time with my child, invest in my child, love my child, and respect the mother of my child.” In the past four months, we have distributed over 2,000 pins and commitment cards throughout Ohio.

4) Train Professionals: The Ohio Commission on Fatherhood sponsors trainings to build organizations’ capacity to serve fathers and families. The Commission is dedicated to supporting and empowering families and communities through teaching and organizational development. The OCF has developed curriculum that increases knowledge on how to engage fathers and improves the attitudes of program participants about fathering. For example, the OCF developed a training for child welfare workers entitled, “How to Engage the Non-Resident Father.” The objective of this training is to provide participants with knowledge to support a practice shifting toward engaging

non-resident fathers in child welfare cases. Social workers learn engagement strategies designed to encourage partnerships with fathers to promote positive outcomes of safety, permanency and well-being for children. Trainings like this allow the Commission to strategically promote father engagement on all levels.

The Ohio Commission on Fatherhood agrees with David Hansell, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and urges you to support the Fatherhood, Marriage and Families Innovation Fund. We believe that the Innovation Fund will advance fatherhood programming in the right direction to benefit families and children.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony about the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood's important work.