Policy Matters Ohio

TESTIMONY

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Amended HB 649 risks kids' safety, undercuts county prosecutors, and makes child care less affordable and accessible

Testimony to the House Children and Human Services Committee on House Bill 649

Good morning Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the committee. My name is Heather Smith, and I am a researcher with Policy Matters Ohio, a non-partisan, nonprofit think tank. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Please accept this written testimony on House Bill 649, which bypasses county prosecutors for investigation and prosecution of public misuse of funds and requires photo or technological identification of infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and young kids attending publicly funded child care.

Ohio already has strong systems in place to protect children and taxpayers. Licensed child care providers follow more than 1,000 regulations and undergo routine, thorough, unannounced inspections every year. Those reports are available for anyone to review. Suggesting that oversight is lax is simply untrue, and introducing harmful legislation in response to fabricated internet rumors is unacceptable.

When cases of fraud go un-prosecuted at the county level, it's often due to a lack of evidence — as testimony for House Bill 647 illuminated. Our American justice system hinges on the assumption of innocence until proven guilty. Allegations of fraud without evidence to prove public misuse of funds are just that: allegations. Implementing state-level oversight to this degree degrades the public trust in their justice system to deliver unbiased, grounded rulings and erodes democratic norms.

This bill would also require photo, video, or facial recognition of infants, toddlers, and young children when arriving at child care. Besides the logistics of wrangling young children first thing in the morning to stay still for a photo or for facial recognition, House Bill 649 inserts substantial security and privacy risks. While we appreciate the removal of the full security surveillance system and required deletion of media from DCY after attendance verification in the original text, this bill remains a threat to children's safety.

Facial recognition software, especially delivered by a third party vendor, is not free from security risk. There must be end-to-end encryption to ensure facial data points are kept secure. It also places additional burdens on PFCC children that their peers do not carry. Requiring this level of oversight for families who are eligible for publicly funded childcare penalizes low-income families for being low-income.

Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute with offices in Cleveland and Columbus.

House Bill 649 sets a dangerous precedent for government surveillance and will lead to many providers ending their PFCC agreements with the state to avoid the additional red tape. In Appalachian counties, where nearly two million Ohioans (17% of the state's population) reside, fewer than 500 programs accept PFCC. Additional regulations like those in House Bill 649 will make child care even harder for families to access and afford.[1] For comparison, in the Columbus metro area, with a similar population size (18% of the state's population), there are nearly 700 programs accepting PFCC.

House Bill 649, if implemented, would restrict access to affordable, high-quality child care for families who need it most. I urge you to not vote this bill out of committee. Thank you.

[1] Ohio's childcare crisis, 2025. A. Smith, K. Poe, and H. Smith. Policy Matters Ohio. April 15, 2025.