



Ohio Judicial Conference

The Voice of Ohio Judges

Senate Judiciary Committee

Judge Matthew Reger

Proponent Testimony on Substitute Senate Bill 174

May 20, 2026

Chair Thomas, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Synenberg and members of the House Judiciary Committee, I thank you for this opportunity to provide proponent testimony for Substitute Senate Bill 174 on behalf of the Ohio Judicial Conference.

I am Judge Matthew Reger of the Wood County Court of Common Pleas Judge, where I was elected in 2016 and reelected in 2022. Prior to taking the bench, I served as a staff attorney for Common Pleas Judge Charles F. Kurfess and as Chief Municipal Prosecutor for the City of Bowling Green. My jurisdiction includes civil, criminal and domestic relations. In addition to my experience as a prosecutor, I had a private practice that included a substantial number of guardian ad litem cases over a 20-year period. I gained a unique experience into the needs of families going through the issues of divorce and dissolution when I founded and ran Community Christian Legal Services (CCLS) in 2008. This non-profit provided free legal services to those in need. The overwhelming majority of cases that came to the legal services clinic involved domestic relations.

My experience with domestic relations law has taught me that marriage and parenting are not 50/50 endeavors; they require each partner to give 100 percent of their time, effort, and commitment. Even when both parents remain fully committed, however, the way their time and responsibilities are allocated is rarely equal. In many families, responsibilities are divided based on practical realities. One spouse may assume the role of primary financial provider, which can limit their time with the children. The other, whether by circumstance or mutual agreement—such as a stay-at-home parent or a parent with a more flexible schedule—may spend a greater share of time managing daily caregiving. As children grow, these roles often become even more varied: one parent may handle morning routines, while the other manages pickups; one may transport children to activities, while the other volunteers as a coach, den leader, or support at events. Parenting, by its nature, is dynamic and often imbalanced in terms of time and function.

All of this underscores an important point: while a 50/50 division of parenting time may seem ideal in theory, it does not reflect the lived reality of most families. For a court to ignore these realities—by starting from an arbitrary presumption of equal division—risks imposing a framework that does not fit the family before it. This approach does not diminish the rights of either parent. Rather, it centers the focus where it belongs: on the best interests of the children. Parenting decisions should begin and end with that principle. Parental rights, standing alone, carry little weight if the needs and well-being of the children are not fully met.

Background of S.B. 174

The history of this bill began when the 122nd General Assembly created the Ohio Task Force on Family Law and Children in 1999. In 2001, the Task Force released a list of goals and recommendations for family law reform. In 2005, the Supreme Court of Ohio's Task Force on Family Law & Children issued another report on family law reform. Over the next several years, the Supreme Court's Advisory Committee on Children & Families worked to implement the Task Force's recommendation. Specifically, the Advisory Committee's Subcommittee on Family Law Reform Implementation (FLRI) was created and charged with this task. In the intervening years, the FLRI Subcommittee has worked on numerous projects, including creating of the Guardian ad Litem rules, uniform Domestic Relations forms, publishing of numerous guides for courts and parents and the hosting of two statewide summits.

In 2015, FLRI's "Legislative Reform Workgroup" began identifying necessary revisions to the Ohio Revised Code to effectuate the Task Force's child-centric goals. This group consisted of judicial officers, family law practitioners, a parent coordinator, and a social sciences academic. The group proposed a significant rewrite of Chapter 3109 regarding the allocation of parental rights and responsibilities language with an emphasis on the statutory "best interest of the child" factors outlined in R.C. 3109.04.

Over the last several years, the Workgroup's 19-page list of recommendations were expanded into a 400+ page bill (including numerous cross-reference changes) that was first introduced last G.A. as S.B. 325. In the fall of 2024, a group of judges met with Representatives to discuss additional areas of agreement for family law reform. Many of these ideas were added to the bill, including language about "maximizing parenting time," and reforming the temporary orders process to clarify that the court is not to draw any presumptions based on the temporary orders in allocating parenting responsibilities or approving a parenting plan. Additional clarifications were included in the recently accepted Substitute S.B. 174, making this bill a truly collaborative effort of the legislature, the judiciary and the family law community.

Bill Highlights

Highlights of the newly accepted substitute bill include:

Discontinuation of labels such as "residential parent" or "custodial parent" to remove the perception that one parent may have the upper hand or more authority than the other. This was a deliberate decision to help minimize the adversarial nature of these types of proceedings. Instead, there will be a "designated parent" or parents for each of the parenting rights listed in the parenting plan. [R.C. 3109.04(B).]

All parenting responsibilities are allocated in the parenting plan, which seeks to ensure that "parents or legal custodians share in the responsibilities of raising a child, enable a child to enjoy a meaningful relationship with both parents or legal custodians, and maximize parenting time with each parent." [R.C. 3109.044.]

A requirement that the court give "special weight" to a jointly-filed parenting plan and incorporate all provisions of the plan that are complete and in the best interest of the child. [R.C. 3109.046.]

Current law allows for modifications of parenting plans based on a "change of circumstances" for only the residential parent. By eliminating the "residential parent" label, the bill expands the ability of both parents to file for change of circumstances that can include positive reinforcement of (current) nonresidential parents. [R.C. 3104.0419.]

Simplification of paternity establishment & request for rights. [R.C. 3111.13(C).]

Waiver of the initial filing fee for a complaint involving unmarried parents. The bill also requires the court to hold a hearing within 30 days after the complaint is filed and served. [R.C. 3109.12.]

The last three changes highlight the overriding goal of making the bill as father-friendly as possible, without taking anything away from mothers. This can be achieved by keeping the focus where it should be—on the best interest of the children. We believe this bill accomplishes that goal.

The bill also contains an uncodified section requiring domestic relations and juvenile courts to update their local rules based on the bill's provisions. Family law judges will work with the Supreme Court to educate courts and provide recommendations for local rules that maximize parenting time in a manner that is developmentally appropriate for the children. These updates will help promote uniformity across the State.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of Substitute S.B. 174. We thank the sponsors, Senator Gavarone and Senator Hicks-Hudson, for introducing this bill, and we thank Representative Williams for his work on improvements that help clarify the bill's original intent. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.