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***Children's Defense Fund-Ohio and Groundwork Ohio Partner to
Expand Ohio Infant-Toddler Court Teams***

Columbus, Ohio: The Children's Defense Fund-Ohio and Groundwork Ohio announced today a unique partnership to improve outcomes for Ohio infants, toddlers and their families who are involved in the state juvenile court and child welfare systems. The partnership between the two leading state child advocacy organizations will support the development of Infant-Toddler Court Teams in Cuyahoga, Montgomery, and Scioto counties under the leadership of Judge Kristin Sweeney, Judge Helen Wallace and Judge Alan Lemons respectively. The work will be funded by a one-year, \$425,000 State Expansion Grant from ZERO TO THREE, a national leader whose mission is to ensure that all babies and toddlers have a strong start in life. The organizations have engaged Cindy Oser, recently retired as Director of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health at ZERO TO THREE to serve as the Statewide Coordinator for the grant.

"We are thrilled to be announcing this partnership at a time when our children need our attention now more than ever," said Tracy Nájera, Executive Director of Children's Defense Fund-Ohio. "Given the priorities of Governor DeWine and the needs of our youngest Ohioans and their families, the timing is right for Ohio to focus, across sectors and at state and community levels, on improving the safety, stability and well-being of babies, toddlers and families under court jurisdiction. This evidence-based and highly effective intervention will also inform our ongoing policy work at the state level."

"We know that babies in the child welfare system - and their families - are not receiving the preventive evidence-based interventions needed to fully address their developmental, health, mental health and substance abuse needs during the most critical period of brain development," said Shannon Jones, Executive Director of Groundwork Ohio. "Without early interventions, we find these children again in our state systems with delays in development, emotional distress, learning problems, and difficulty forming healthy relationships later in life," Jones continued.

"By implementing Infant-Toddler Court Teams using the Safe Babies Court Team approach in these counties, judicial leaders and local communities will be equipped with technical assistance and evidence-based practices to provide families with the tools and resources needed to have safe and nurturing relationships with their young child," said Cindy Oser, Statewide Coordinator for the Ohio Infant-Toddler Court Team Expansion Grant. "If we don't address root causes and stop cycles of maltreatment and child welfare involvement where they begin, we will continue to pay for costly court involvement and unproductive remediation later in life," Oser continued.

The first years of life represent the period of most rapid brain growth in young children, and the time when nurturing relationships between parents and children lay the foundation for lifelong health, development, and well-being. Adverse experiences during the early years, such as exposure to violence, maltreatment, or separation from caregivers with whom babies have begun to form attachments, can have long-lasting consequences. One out of every 39 Ohio babies under 1 year old are victims of maltreatment and 0-4 year olds make up nearly 40% of all children in state custody. Additionally, the opioid epidemic has impacted our youngest children profoundly with 70% of infants less than 1 year old in custody having parents who use opiates including heroin.

The [ZERO TO THREE Safe Babies Court Team™](#) approach transforms child welfare into the practice of child “well-being” by using the science of early childhood development to meet the urgent needs of infants and toddlers. The grant will support the implementation of the Safe Babies Court Team approach in three local communities. Local community implementation, outcomes and learnings will be rigorously evaluated. Further learnings will be monitored by an Ohio Infant Toddler Court Team State Advisory Group which will be instrumental in informing state policies necessary to better serve young children and families and expand the approach across the state. The approach has been in place in Lucas County since 2016 under the thoughtful leadership of Judge Denise Cubbon.

Founded in 1981, Children’s Defense Fund-Ohio champions policies and programs that lift children out of poverty, protect them from abuse and neglect and ensure their access to appropriate and targeted health care, quality education and a moral and spiritual foundation. The Children’s Defense Fund Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. To learn more about Children’s Defense Fund-Ohio visit www.cdfohio.org and follow us on Twitter @cdf_ohio and Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/CDFOHIO>.

Groundwork Ohio is a committed, nonpartisan public-policy research and advocacy organization formed in 2004 that champions high-quality early learning and healthy development strategies from the prenatal period to age five, that lay a strong foundation for Ohio kids, families and communities. To learn more about Groundwork Ohio visit www.GroundworkOhio.org and follow us on Twitter @GroundworkOhio and Facebook, www.facebook.com/GroundworkOhio.

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