

**Janet Callison, State Director Best Buddies Ohio**  
**Testimony before the 2017 Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services**  
**March 22, 2017**

Good afternoon. My name is Janet Callison and I am the State Director for the Best Buddies Ohio, a state affiliate of Best Buddies International. Founded in 1989, Best Buddies is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide opportunities for one-to-one friendships, leadership development, and integrated employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

My son has Down syndrome. Because of his diagnosis, he finds it more challenging to establish meaningful friendships than his typical peers. Due to its mission, I was drawn to Best Buddies as I began my search for ways to increase my son's success in high school. Beginning in 2014, and with the support of Best Buddies, a dedicated group of parents, professionals, and friends successfully raised the funds needed to open a state affiliate office in Ohio. Since opening in early 2016, we have expanded Best Buddies inclusion programs to 19 school-based chapters, launched an employer engagement initiative to cultivate greater support of integrated employment for people with IDD, and launched our public speaking program, Best Buddies Ambassadors.

Without formal opportunities to get to know one another, people with and without IDD are unlikely to develop true social connections on their own. By creating one-to-one peer mentoring friendships through the Best Buddies Middle Schools, High Schools, and Colleges programs, we remove social barriers and assuage the effects of physical barriers that inhibit interaction between Ohioans with and without IDD. As a result, participants with IDD are more socially integrated in their school or community, have increased involvement in leisure activities with a friend, and demonstrate improved social interactions. They are, subsequently, more employable, more independent, and more included in their communities. Participants without IDD become more aware that people with IDD can hold jobs in the community, support having neighbors with IDD, and are willing to work at a company that employs people with and without IDD.

We are excited about the impact and growth in our first year of operation; however, we are humbled by the 40 middle schools, high schools, and colleges that are now on our waiting list. Securing support from the state of Ohio would empower Best Buddies to fulfill a gap in community-based services offered to Ohioans. With this funding, we would expand from 19 school-based chapters and 1,000 participants to 60 schools and 3,000 participants, an increase of 20 schools and 1,000 per year, by the end of the biennium.

Now, I am pleased to introduce Mason Quinn and Samantha Schon, participants in Best Buddies at Miami University, to share how Best Buddies has impacted their lives.

**Samantha Schon, Secretary and Participant, Best Buddies Miami University of Ohio**

Hello, my name is Samantha Schon. I'm 20 years old and a sophomore at Miami University of Ohio studying Kinesiology and Disability Studies, with a plan to become an Occupational Therapist. I am a quadruplet, and two of my sisters have intellectual disabilities. It has always been difficult to find programs and organizations that could offer my sisters what they want and need – relationships with people who understand and appreciate them. When I found out about Best Buddies, I knew immediately I had to join.

I serve as the chapter's secretary and I was matched in a one-to-one friendship with Mason in the fall. Our chapter has 296 participants and we created 72 one-to-one friendships between people with and without disabilities.

It has been wonderful to see not only our friendship, but also other friendships within the chapter grow. By modeling inclusive behavior, our chapter has taught the Miami U community about leadership, friendship, and acceptance of people with disabilities. Because of the experiences and friendships created through Best Buddies, I believe that there is a great need for more compassion and understanding for my friends with disabilities.

My hope is that more people will have the chance to have the same experience that Mason and I are having. My family is from Hamilton County. There are no Best Buddies chapters around us. I ask that you support an appropriation for Best Buddies so that more Ohioans with intellectual disabilities, like my sisters, are able experience the many positive effects of this program.

**Mason Quinn, Participant, Best Buddies Miami University of Ohio**

My name is Mason Quinn and I'm 20 years old. I'm at Butler Tech in the Project Search program, and I work at West Chester Hospital in food and nutrition.

Sam and I like to hang out, go out to eat, and do other fun stuff like bowling, pumpkin carving, and riding around in a golf cart. We like to go to Best Buddies Miami group events and the Best Buddies gala.

Best Buddies has really impacted me. I have done a lot of fun things and made a lot of new friends. I'm looking forward to continuing my participation and having new experiences.

Best Buddies is important to me because it helps me to feel comfortable in more situations. It also helps guide me through the many challenges that I face in my life. I think Ohio needs more Best Buddies chapters because everyone deserves to be part of something like Best Buddies and we hope that you agree. Thank you for your time.