

**Testimony on HB 49**  
**House Finance Health and Human Services Sub-Committee**

**Presented by: Mark Schlater, Chief Executive Officer for Toward Independence**

Dear Mr. Chair, Ranking Member Sykes, and Members of the House Finance Health and Human Services Sub-Committee:

My name is Mark Schlater, Chief Executive Officer of Toward Independence Inc., located in Xenia, Ohio. Toward Independence is a private, non-profit agency that has been providing services for 42 years to individuals with developmental disabilities living in Clark, Darke, Greene, Hamilton, Miami and Montgomery County. I have been working in the field of developmental disabilities for 37 years, starting as a Direct Care Professional in 1980 and now as Chief Executive Officer for Toward Independence.

I am here today to support the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD) funding initiatives in HB 49 as introduced. The specific funding requests as outlined will help to support a developmental disabilities system that has very critical needs. The most critical concern for service providers in Ohio is the drastic shortage of a qualified workforce. The success of agencies like Toward Independence is measured “each day” based on the quality of services they deliver to the individuals we are proud to serve. Those quality services include dependable and reliable care that involve dispensing lifesaving medication, behavior support interventions, providing nutritious meals, homemaker personal care, transportation, money management and leisure activities. These services are provided 24 hours per day, seven days a week – evenings, weekends, and holidays. Direct Support Professionals are true professionals; to do this job takes a tremendous amount of training, skill and patience. When recruiting qualified people to do these very important tasks, agencies should not have to compete with fast food, large box stores or convenience stores based on wages offered. The average wage for Direct Support Professionals is just a little over \$10.00 per hour. Adequate funding to ensure there is a qualified workforce in both quality and quantity is necessary, now more than ever.

This industry is in crisis; record staff turnover (75.69% in 2016), record overtime (9.72% overtime rate in 2016), and now I am seeing for the first time, mid-management staff who often need to cover open shifts deciding to leave the workforce due to their work – life imbalance. Remember, our clients depend on us to ensure their health and safety, it is not an option for us to provide these services; we have to find a way. Due to the inability to secure an adequate number of qualified employees, Toward Independence has, for the first time, been forced to give a 30 day-notice to terminate current service obligations to lessen the number of locations and clients we serve as a way to spread existing workforce to cover our open shifts.

Over the past year, I have listened to crying mothers asking for assistance, I have talked to parents who have been searching for a provider for their son or daughter without success, I have listened to staff indicating they are burned out and trying to determine if they will stay in this field. I represent over 300 direct support staff who need better wages and to be recognized for the important work they do each day.

I recognize that two years ago, Governor Kasich increased funding with the Ohio Legislature's support; we **were tremendously grateful for those new dollars which were directly passed on to our hard working staff**. However, with the Developmental Disabilities system in transition, our human services field is stretched thin. We need more Direct Support Professionals to fill open shifts in order to meet the current and new HCBS waivers and to support the Adult Day service needs now that County Boards of DD are discontinuing direct care services.

In addition, before I close, I am asking for your support of the ICF program. As indicated, I have been involved with the DD System for many years; the ICF program has always been a consistent and dependable option for many individuals needing long-term support. Toward Independence operates six locations; all are four- and eight-bed homes, all of which have operated at almost a 100% capacity. This prospective rate-reimbursement system has provided dependable and predictable reimbursement to ensure quality care and services are provided. HB 49 contains a freeze in the provider rates and many of the components of the new reimbursement system need to be reviewed and tested to ensure they will not cause further harm to this fragile system. I appreciate the effort DODD has made in working with OPRA and other stakeholders. This is a very import program for many Ohioans.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and I would be happy to answer any of your questions.

Sincerely,



Mark J. Schlater  
Chief Executive Officer  
Toward Independence, Inc.