

Dear Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Sykes and Members of the Committee:

My name is Sarah Underhill and I am here today as an advocate for someone who cannot advocate for herself, my sister Susie and the thousands of others like her who live in ICFs in Ohio. These are the people who cannot afford the social services program to fail them. Their circumstances are not of their own making but the results of an unfortunate hand dealt to them in life. My sister suffered severe brain damage as a result of an incident at birth and is wheelchair bound, has a severe seizure disorder and is unable to communicate. The ICF model has been a perfect fit for my sister for close to 30 years and she depends on the direct service providers who care for her.

I am asking that you support the Department of Developmental Disabilities funding initiatives in HB 49 as introduced. This budget has a much needed increase for ICFs in the second year. This is important. Direct care staff, who are like family to my sister, are making the difficult choice to leave for other jobs because they cannot make a livable wage. It is a disturbing trend when caregivers who have a heart for those that society generally turns their back on leave, not because of a lack of passion for the job, but because the job does not pay well enough. For people like my sister, the familiarity of a trusted care giver and the continuity of service providers directly correlate to their emotional and physical well-being. Since she cannot speak, it takes time for her caregivers to understand the nuances of her personality and to gain her trust. The direct service provider's ability to give quality care to my sister depends on this legislature and its willingness to prioritize funding for ICFs.

Imagine making the gut wrenching decision to give the care of your mentally and/or medically fragile son, daughter, sister or brother to the hands of a stranger because you are no longer able to care for them. Then imagine watching this stranger build a relationship with your loved one and see that they truly care for them and are becoming like family. It is difficult to watch these special people leave our lives and then have your loved one start this entire process over again with someone new. For a person who cannot speak, it is frightening to regularly have to acclimate to a stranger who comes into your home to bathe you, feed you, and change your diaper. You are totally dependent on them. As they are just starting to get to know you and gain your trust, they leave and you have to start this process again. It's like losing a family member over and over and over. My sister is a valuable human being and many people love her. We must take care of the people who care for her. They are angels on this earth and if they are taking care of my family they should be able to afford to take care of their family too.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I would be happy to answer any questions.