

Ohio House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services

Testimony of:

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Chairman Romanchuk, Ranking Member West, and members of the Health and Human Services Subcommittee, good morning.

My name is John Aller and I am the Executive Director of Stark County Mental Health and Addiction Recovery. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony this morning.

I would like to start with some context.

- Last week, the Health Policy Institute of Ohio released the 2019 Health Value Dashboard. In this report, Ohio ranked 46th in health value. The report highlights the impact of addiction on the health of Ohioans identifying critical gaps that remain in addressing the addiction crisis, including inadequate capacity for treatment and support services and the need for a comprehensive approach to prevention.
- In 2017, 4,854 Ohioans died from unintentional drug overdoses and a recent report released by the Ohio Department of Health shows that the illicit fentanyl was involved in the majority of overdose deaths. In deaths involving a combination of fentanyl and other drugs, the highest percentage were related to a combination of cocaine and fentanyl/related drugs. Also, in 2017, black non-Hispanic males had the highest rate of drug overdose deaths.
- The CDC has reported that in 2017, 1,740 Ohioans died by suicide. From 1999 to 2016 Ohio's suicide rate increased by 36% making Ohio's increase the 19th highest in the country.
- From January 2008 to December 2017, over 500,000 years of life were lost in Ohio.

I share all of these figures to show that there is still tremendous need in our communities for mental health and addiction services. We have to continue to provide prevention education, and treatment services while engaging clients in care, and support them as they work toward recovery.

I would now like to spend a moment discussing the details of what we're experiencing in Stark County. In the last several years, we've focused on the opioid crisis. This was critical work and it was important that we prioritized access to services and supports. Stark MHAR currently coordinates an opiate taskforce with over 40 community partners. On this front, we've started to see success. The overdose trends in our community are down over the last few years by 36%. This is encouraging, but in no way a signal that our work is complete. While our overdose death numbers may be down, we're seeing an increase in individuals using methamphetamine and cocaine. Our law enforcement partners and our jails are seeing more issues with these drugs and our treatment providers are experiencing more clients presenting with poly-substance issues. Strong community partnerships between criminal justice, health care, behavioral health and other partners have shown positive results with the opioid crisis. Having needed resources and flexibility to address other emerging drugs before they reach an epidemic level is crucial as we move the system forward.

In Stark County, we've also experienced a suicide cluster. When this cluster emerged community partners including law enforcement, health care providers, public health and schools quickly redeployed effort and resources to address the crisis. Expansion of our 24-hour mobile response team was quickly implemented. This 24-hour mobile response team has been instrumental in impacting kids with suicidal ideation in our

community. However, that vast majority of 24hour mobile response is not billable to Medicaid and therefore state GRF and local levy dollars are critical to sustain this service.

For our community, this suicide cluster experience has resulted in increased partnerships with schools, law enforcement, health care and other community organizations working to respond to the contagion and focused on prevention messaging throughout our community.

The scenarios I've just outlined demonstrate why we are asking you to sustain the investments made in the Governor's as-introduced budget. We are also asking you to ensure the resources are directed to local Boards and are as flexible as possible. As local Boards, we're on the ground in our communities. We see trends changing and the evolution of the needs of our citizens quickly. With flexible resources we are able to work with our partners to rapidly respond to community needs.

We also need these resources to be sustainable so that we can stand up needed programs and services in our community knowing that we can provide ongoing resources to support investments that are making a difference for our citizens. Local Boards, and the agencies that we work with, pursue a number of grants to support services in our communities and these are great when we can seamlessly incorporate them into our continuum of care when the grant priorities and timeline align with what our communities need. However, we're also beginning to experience grant fatigue. When so many fund sources are coming to communities via grants with certain requirements for certain populations on specific timelines, it makes it very hard to put together a complete continuum of care for all individuals in our community.

I know you have a very complicated task before as you continue your deliberations on the biennial budget. As you continue your work, I encourage you to prioritize the increased investments made in the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services community line items. These resources, provided to local Boards with the ability to flexibly meet community needs, will support increased access to critical services, including withdrawal management, crisis stabilization, prevention, and more. I would ask you to consider someone you may know who has been impacted by a mental health disorder or the disease of addiction, and pause to reflect on the complexity of their particular situation and their unique needs. The more pliable funds are, the more capacity service providers have to work toward the best possible outcome for each person – your constituents and our clients have shown us the importance of “meeting people where they are.”

Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. At this point, I'll introduce Colleen Chamberlain, the next panelist. I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have at the end of the panel.