

**Written Testimony to the House Finance Committee on Primary and Secondary Education**

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Thank you, co-chairpersons Cupp and Patterson for the opportunity to provide written testimony on HB 166, the state operating budget and the impact of several critically important investments for the children engaged in the public education system in the state of Ohio.

My name is Megan Kleidon, and I am the President and CEO of Red Oak Behavioral Health, headquartered in Akron. Red Oak is one of the **largest providers of school-based behavioral health services in the state** and an active member of the Ohio Council of Behavioral Health & Family Services Providers and the Mental Health & Addiction Advocacy Coalition. When combined with our outpatient mental health services for children and families, our **staff of 150** professionals serves **over 4,500 children and adults each year across four Northeast Ohio counties**. We pride ourselves on providing behavioral health services that “**meet you where you are**” – both clinically and physically – and our community partnerships and **integrated approach to service delivery** allow us to connect individuals and families to the resources and supports they need **to build a better life and a brighter future**.

In 1998, Red Oak embarked on an innovative local partnership with Akron Public Schools to provide **mental health counseling onsite for students at risk for suspension/expulsion due to the behaviors associated with their mental illness**. What began as a small pilot with a few schools quickly grew, and today we have **staff embedded bell-to-bell in 88 schools across four counties**, including at least **one licensed social worker or therapist** and at least **one qualified mental health specialist who provides therapeutic behavior support in every building**.

Research shows that school-based mental health services meet a growing unmet need for children and youth by **reducing barriers to accessing care** (including stigma, transportation, or schedule conflicts), providing an opportunity to **identify needs and intervene early**, and serving children and youth in the environment where they **already have connections and perceived sense of safety**. In addition, providing wraparound mental health services in schools allows our education system to pair **social-emotional learning with academic learning** to ensure students receive the **full learning continuum necessary for success**.

I will use my remarks today to highlight the potential impact of **two key proposed investments** on the mental health and social-emotional wellbeing of the students engaged in our education system. These investments are vital to the stability and success of the children we work together to serve, and I urge you to ensure they remain intact.

## Investments in K-12 Education and Wraparound Services

I had the privilege of testifying earlier this week to the Subcommittee on Health and Human Services regarding the Administration's proposed investment of **\$18 million in evidence-based prevention curricula for schools that teach students the social-emotional skills necessary to make healthy decisions**. These funds will allow agencies like ours to have access to **cutting-edge materials** and **broaden our reach** to serve far more students. While Red Oak can and does provide mental health *treatment* services to students with a diagnosed mental health disorder in all of our partner school districts today, **prevention programming is not reimbursable through insurance** and cannot be provided consistently without designated funding. These funds would allow schools and agencies like ours to work collaboratively to address the needs of all children with coordinated and standardized programming, regardless of diagnosis.

Even more imperative than the support for the purchase of curricula is the support for the individuals responsible for delivering it. As you know, the Administration has proposed **\$550 million in funding over the biennium to support wraparound services, mental health counseling and other needs of at-risk students in Ohio schools**. These funds will help ensure struggling children are able to learn and allow schools to redirect core funding they've dedicated to those purposes back to the classroom. At Red Oak, we support the Administration's recommendation that **these dollars should be used to support school partnerships with community mental health providers and social services agencies** for service delivery, and not for schools to hire their own mental health staff members. While schools are experts in providing academic training and education, **agencies like ours are the experts in providing mental health, prevention and intervention services for at-risk students**. Partnering with community agencies allows those dollars to be leveraged with insurance billing whenever possible to **stretch resources**, provides a **sustainability plan**, and **removes any potential conflict of interest** by ensuring the mental health needs and progress of students are documented outside of the formal education system. Community mental health agencies are **licensed and credentialed** to provide this type of care, provide the **necessary supervision** to those who deliver services, can serve as **care coordinators** providing **linkage to additional community resources** for services such food, housing or other medical care, and are equipped to **ensure coverage in these roles during maternity leaves or other leaves of absence**. During a time when suicide rates are on the rise, and drug addiction remains an epidemic, **having the right people providing the right services in the right setting has never been more important**.

## Increased Community Efforts and Education

The Administration has also proposed a **\$5 million investment to build the capacity of laypeople and community leaders to serve as first-responders** for individuals experiencing a

mental health crisis. One in ten calls to 911 involve an individual with mental illness – and one in four Ohioans will meet the criterion for a mental health diagnosis in their lifetime. Statistics from a recent University of Akron study paint an even more alarming picture, with more than 70% of campus students surveyed meeting criterion for a diagnosis of depression or anxiety.

At Red Oak, we witnessed firsthand the need to build community capacity to respond to those in need and reduce the stigma associated with mental illness from some of our primary partners – our school districts. In response, we sent two of our leaders to become certified trainers in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) in Fall 2018. **An evidence-based program**, MHFA is similar to traditional First Aid, training laypeople not to be healthcare experts but rather to **identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders.**

We began training community members across various sectors in January of this year and are **scheduled to train our first two full school districts in MHFA** in August. Given recent coverage of the **link between school shootings and unrecognized or untreated mental health needs**, our **school partners are hungry to build their capacity to identify those in need and intervene before it's too late.** Investing in MHFA training will allow us to empower individuals throughout our community, including educators, librarians, public transport workers, safety forces and parents, to recognize and intervene during a mental health crisis and create a safe space for those experiencing mental health symptoms to seek support.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide written testimony regarding the importance of these investments in Ohio's Children. We are grateful for your support.