

Ohio Senate Finance Higher Education Subcommittee

FY20-21 Budget Testimony, May 7, 2019

Testimony from Thomas Rieland, General Manager of WOSU Public Media in Columbus on behalf of the Ohio Alliance for Public Telecommunications.

Chair Kunze, Ranking Member Williams and members of the subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the operating budget for the Broadcast Educational Media Commission. My name is Tom Rieland, I am the current president of the Ohio Alliance for Public Telecommunications, which represents the 11 public television stations, the 32 public radio stations and the 6 radio reading services that provide service to all Ohioans.

I also serve as General Manager of WOSU Public Media, which broadcasts this region's PBS station, public radio news station, and classical music station to 30 counties in central and southern Ohio. Within this sub-committee, I know we have viewers and listeners of WOSU, WGTE in Toledo, WPTD in Dayton, WCET in Cincinnati, WVIZ in Cleveland and perhaps other stations.

Like other public stations in Ohio, WOSU extends our service to many rural areas including smaller communities. For instance, our station has a translator to broadcast television into the Mansfield area and operates four FM stations serving the communities Marion, Mansfield, Coshocton and Portsmouth. These rural stations could not survive without state support.

Many of the state's public radio and television stations also partner with Ohio Radio Reading Service operations in their area to distribute their programming to the blind and visually impaired and provide many other public services.

I'd like to focus my comments today on three points that represent just a small measure of the potential of Ohio's public stations. That potential is possible if you can help us return to the operating funding levels of 2008, before the great recession. That is our request as outlined in the Optimal Budget information provided.

First – you likely know that public television in Ohio is deeply rooted in their communities and act as conveners encouraging citizen involvement and dialogue about important issues. The quality of the public television and radio programming produced across Ohio is phenomenal. From news and sports programs to public forums, major documentaries, performance broadcasts, and a commitment to telling the story of the arts, history and culture of our neighborhoods.

The stations collaborate on many projects with the technical assistance of the Broadcast Educational Media Commission. As just one example, last October public TV stations in Cincinnati, Columbus, and Cleveland partnered to convene a digital forum featuring the gubernatorial candidates. With several hundred high school students in studio at WVIZ in Cleveland and with students watching the live stream online and through social media in classrooms across Ohio, the candidates answered student questions about affordable higher education, state testing, alternative job paths, and more. It was a very successful educational activity that the candidates and the students enjoyed and something we would like to replicate in the future with state support.

A team of Ohio's public stations are working on a documentary this summer about the need for the underemployed high school graduates of Ohio to be connected to job training opportunities that can provide a good career. You can look for that documentary on all of Ohio's public TV stations this fall. This collaborative work, with each station providing a portion of the cost, allows us to best leverage state money to focus on the needs of the entire state. Another recent project focused on the status of Veterans in the Buckeye State. With a small increase in state funding, we can do much more.

Second, public media's strategic plans are set by a strong sense of mission with a set of goals built through governing and community advisory boards connected to the areas we serve. It is a very inclusive process. And what you see in these goals and mission statements are words like *serve, inspire, educate, inform, engage*. Public Media has become more important than ever as a trusted noncommercial, nonprofit media resource. For example ---

- Since the last operating budget deliberations, Ohio's public television stations have added the 24-hour PBS Kids Channel to their broadcast lineup covering nearly all of Ohio. This programming has quickly gained a strong audience across Ohio, especially among the at-risk families in the state and the hundreds of thousands of homes without cable or satellite TV. All stations also perform educational outreach and in the last fiscal year provided 1200 educational events engaging 72,000 educators with professional development workshops related to STEM teaching and technology integration strategies. Also, over 47,000 educators are using the PBS Learning Media digital resources provided through the public stations in Ohio.
- Ohio's public radio stations also extend their services well beyond broadcast – at WOSU we're sponsoring our third annual REPLAY project this July. This is a musical instrument donation drive that last year resulted in over 300 instruments reconditioned for use in the Columbus City Schools. At Cincinnati Public Radio, they produce a series called *Classics for Kids* and another called *Democracy and Me* with curriculum material developed to state standards. In Yellow Springs and Dayton, station WYSO gives their community a voice to tell their own stories by training listeners to produce radio programming and oral histories.
- At Ohio's six radio reading services, volunteers gather at studios across the state to read local newspapers, national magazines and books to serve the growing population of visually impaired and blind residents. These are distributed through our radio frequencies, on our TV channels, and through new technologies such as smart speakers.

There is a growing demand for this service with aging baby boomers and many others with needing such assistance. VoiceCorps in Columbus was at the Statehouse last week to engage legislators as part of a radio reading services project.

Third, there is more to public media than meets the eye... or the ear.

Ohio's public television stations have become an increasingly important pillar of the state's overall public safety communications system. When you receive a message on your phone about a weather emergency or a local threat, you may not be aware that our public television stations are part of the backbone that delivers that information to the wireless companies. They're called Wireless Emergency Alerts. When a local emergency message appears on your television or over a radio preceded by those special tones, you should know that Ohio was the first state in the country to deliver those messages to other broadcasters and public safety agencies using a cyber-safe digital backbone in a partnership with the Ohio EMA and BEMC. Those digital messages are carried on our local public TV stations, which have contributed part of its broadcast spectrum and the system has become a model for other states in just two years of operation.

In the future, public stations will have even more capability to serve as an emergency backbone to the public safety needs of our state. What we're asking you for today will allow us the flexibility to research ways to expand this technology to support first responders in your districts.

Public stations also provide support, airtime, and manage the efforts of the Ohio Statehouse News Bureau and The Ohio Channel. Stations across Ohio carry of The Ohio Channel using the interconnectivity provided by BEMC. Noting all of this, the Ohio Alliance of Public Telecommunications respectfully requests that you include the nominal increases outlined in the Optimal budget in the new state budget being developed by the House.

Specifically, for radio, TV and the reading services, the optimal proposal is under the CONTENT DEVELOPMENT, line item 935410. This \$1.6 million in additional funding will restore the state support to the pre-recession levels of ten years ago. This request will help us sustain and grow a variety of local services focused on education and public safety, while building new station collaborations to better serve Ohio citizens. It will also assist the radio reading services in expanding its services to the growing population of blind and visually impaired citizens across Ohio.

Finally, the BEMC team is engaged in an exciting and important operational modernization project that impacts all of public television in Ohio. This centralization of public channels for distribution using the state's fiber infrastructure is a big step into Ohio's future, leveraging state support for the greatest good. While the agency's capital plant has been upgraded, operational support remains at low levels. The Alliance of public stations is very supportive of an investment in the skilled personnel needed to operate and maintain new systems at the agency.

The operational support provided to BEMC and public media stations from the State of Ohio assures that all citizens and schools have access to the same quality programs and services no matter where they are located. The breadth and quality of programming and services offered by public media stations and radio reading services in Ohio would not be possible without the critical support from the State through the Broadcast Educational Media Commission. On behalf of millions of Ohio's citizens that access and use our services, we thank you for your past and continued support.

Thank you and this concludes my testimony.