

House Finance Subcommittee on Primary and Secondary Education

Testimony from Thomas Rieland, General Manager, WOSU Public Media,
On behalf of the Ohio Alliance for Public Telecommunications

Chairman Cupp, Ranking Member Phillips and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Tom Rieland, and I serve as General Manager of WOSU Public Media in Columbus, the public broadcast licensee of The Ohio State University. I am here representing the Ohio Alliance for Public Telecommunications, an organization comprised of public television and radio stations in Ohio as well as the radio reading service operations across the state.

Public broadcasting in Ohio reaches virtually every Ohio citizen with public service programming -- journalism, arts and culture, and educational programming that positively impacts lives every day. In fact, over 8 million Ohioans watch their local public television stations on a regular basis. And we are in classrooms across the state with digital media customized for classroom use, and with the PBS Learning Media digital service, developed in partnership with our stations, in which over 30,000 Ohio teachers have already enrolled. Unique local collaborations such as SURGE COLUMBUS that connects teens to digital learning labs across this community, and the AMERICAN GRADUATE INITIATIVE that convenes communities around a common goal of student success, all contribute to the reach of our educational mission.

Like politics, all public broadcasting is local. Although PBS ranks among the public's most trusted national institutions and NPR provides the best journalism on radio, it is the local programming and services that distinguish Ohio's educational stations. That local reach of public media has expanded considerably due to new technology. The potential of providing valuable, trusted information to Ohioans through public media has exploded. But state support to deliver on this potential has been lacking.

At the dawn of the 21st century, the year 2001, each of Ohio's public television and radio stations and the radio reading service was providing a *single* channel of educational and public service programming. The State of Ohio provided funding of over \$5.5 million dollars through the predecessor agency to today's BEMC to support local programming and content to serve the interests, needs and educational aspirations of Ohio's citizens.

Today, public broadcast stations are using digital technology to provide *three and four times* the number of broadcast channels, plus online content and mobile apps so people can access important information and educational resources anytime, anywhere. This new technology has demonstrated its powerful potential for broadening our service considerably, yet today public stations receive only about one-third of the support they garnered from the State of Ohio in 2001.

We appreciate the Governor's recommendation for the continuation of services, but respectfully request an increase of \$1.35 million in the BEMC budget line 935410 for Content Development, Acquisition, and Distribution. This would bring this budget line to \$4 million and reduce by 35 percent the the overall gap created by this history of budget declines.

This funding would serve to enhance the educational Multimedia Grants provided to public stations by BEMC to produce digital media designed for use in Ohio classrooms. These local projects are created in collaboration with a team from the Ohio Department of Education and local educators. The content connects students to the workplace, focusing on the state's future workforce needs and opportunities by profiling career paths in science, technology, health and wellness. Although the project has limited funds, the content is already being accessed by thousands of Ohioans in classrooms and beyond. With this increase in support, we can do much more to assist the efforts of public education in the state and create valuable content for the *Ohio Means Jobs* initiative.

Additional direct support will also assist the efforts of the six Radio Reading Service agencies that serve Ohioans who cannot read standard print because of a visual impairment or physical disability.

Decades ago, innovative thinkers created and funded a fiber optic interconnected public media system providing Ohio's public stations from Athens to Cleveland, from Toledo to Cincinnati, with greater efficiencies and the ability to share programming. This also allowed statewide broadcasts of programming such as the Governor's State of the State Address last night. Dan Shellenberger's *Ohio Government Telecommunications* unit produced the TV coverage carried on *The Ohio Channel* on public TV stations across the state, while Karen Kasler of the *Statehouse News Bureau* anchored the radio coverage aired on public radio stations. This is an important public service, but these efforts would not be possible without the BEMC technology hub in Columbus and the statewide network of local public stations.

The facilities, content and service are all interconnected. Without the BEMC facility, OGT programming from the Statehouse could not be distributed to stations for broadcast, and all public stations are at risk of losing valuable programming and emergency backup services.

This is why the Alliance strongly supports additional funding for BEMC to enable the agency to upgrade its 60-year-old electrical system and provide back-up capability for the video conferencing center, support the interconnection for the public broadcast network, and assure reliability for all of its activities. The Alliance respectfully requests consideration of \$825,000 in additional annual funds required for the operational and maintenance requirements of BEMC. The specific details of these budget requests are attached to my submitted testimony. The Alliance request to improve the operation of the BEMC is spread among three areas of their budget including General Operations, Technology Operations, and Information Technology.

While BEMC and the Ohio's Public Media stations are best known for their broadcast and educational efforts, they also contribute to the safety of all Ohioans. The agency and public stations have always been involved in delivering emergency messaging to the public, but have recently received a \$310,000 federal grant to create a new system to deliver emergency communications. Developed by Ohio's public TV stations in partnership with the BEMC and the Ohio Emergency Management Agency, the system will use a portion of the stations' secure digital spectrum to deliver state, federal and local emergency alerts to other media and important information directly to first responders. These are the kind of collaborations we consistently seek to benefit the state and its citizens.

Since the creation of the first state agency in Ohio to support educational broadcasting in 1961, public media in Ohio has developed a broad public service mission of inspiring, educating and protecting all Ohioans. Whether it be fostering wonder with programs such as NOVA or Nature, providing a safe haven for children with PBS Kids programs, engaging communities with quality journalism and unique local cultural programming, using technology to reach the visually impaired, creating digital content for the classroom, or introducing citizens to the daily work of state government -- we ask you to support the increasingly significant role Ohio's Public Media has in the lives of all our citizens.

This concludes my testimony. I thank you for time this evening.

**Detail for the Supplemental Budget Request
For the Broadcast Educational Media Commission
Recommended by the Alliance for Public Telecommunication**

The Alliance for Public Telecommunication represents the 12 full-power public television stations and translator stations, the 32 public radio stations and repeater stations and the six radio reading services that provide service to all 11.5-million Ohioans. While BEMC was not permitted to request additional funding, the Alliance has reviewed both the budget and the operation of BEMC in its initial two years of existence and are requesting additional funds to "right-size" the agency. These additions will allow BEMC to utilize new technology in the current modernization capital project to support both its current services and allow it to expand those services by better utilizing the state's investment in the Network Operations Center on North Star Road. The Alliance is also requesting restoration of a portion of the level of operating and educational project support for the three public media entities that has been lost to pressures on the state budget over the past decade.

Fund	ALI	ALI Category/Purpose of Request	Additional Request	
			FY 2016	FY 2017
GRF	935408	General Operations		
		Electrical system and related upgrade costs	\$ 200,000	\$ 200,000
		Additional building maintenance costs	\$ 50,000	\$ 50,000
		Annual Total:	\$ 250,000	\$ 250,000

The BEMC Network Operating Center at 2470 North Star Road in Columbus was built in the mid- 1950's and is still dependent on the primary electrical panels installed at that time, which can no longer support the array of multichannel, digital services essential to agency's role as a statewide hub. This includes multi-point videoconferencing for education, interconnection for the state's public broadcasting network, and critical back-up capability to assure reliability for all of its activities. BEMC staff had proposed a plan to upgrade only the technical areas of the building to protect equipment. However, AEP has indicated that the whole building must be upgraded to allow the essential systems to be isolated and protected by the existing emergency generator.

The agency is completing work on a new long-term rental agreement with the owner of the North Star building, The Ohio State University. For many years, BEMC and its predecessor agencies have been responsible for common building maintenance, while the university would be responsible for some, but not all major systems and building needs. Some needs were not addressed until failure. The new rental agreement will assign all maintenance responsibilities to the agency, including such needed items as roof replacement. With little in preventive maintenance being done in the eTech years, the Alliance believes that additional support is needed in the coming biennium for both annual and deferred maintenance to protect the state's investment.

Fund	ALI	ALI Category/Purpose of Request	Additional Request	
			FY 2016	FY 2017
GRF	935409	Technology Operations		
		Provide redundant fiber connections to all TV stations not having them	\$ 37,000	\$ 37,000
		Restore interconnection services to non-co-located radio stations	\$ 50,000	\$ 50,000
		Recover funding for (2) FTE positions transferred to BEMC without funding	\$ 165,000	\$ 165,000
		Additional (1) FTE for upgraded Master Control operation	\$ 76,000	\$ 76,000
		Additional equipment needed to support modernization efforts	\$ 100,000	\$ 100,000
		Annual total:	\$ 428,000	\$ 428,000

While the majority of the television stations have a redundant connection to the state fiber network to protect against a localized failure in the network, several Ohio stations still rely on a single connection. With reliable network access being critical to the station operations and to the reliability of the new state Emergency Messaging System, the Alliance requests funding to support the installation and ongoing service costs of redundant connections to all stations.

In the final years of eTech, interconnection with the state system for the stand-alone public radio stations were eliminated without consultation, while radio stations co-located with TV stations were still provided this service. Although direct connection to the state fiber system is no longer the best financial option, the Alliance believes the state should also support less expensive, alternative methods for interconnection for all radio operations.

When eTech functions were divided between BEMC and other agencies two years, the Grant Administrator and Communications Officer positions and their funding were assigned to the Board of Regents. It became quickly obvious that these functions were needed for BEMC operation and the individuals were returned to the Commission staff, but not the funding to pay for them. The Alliance is requesting that funding be provided to BEMC to support these positions.

With recent adjustments, staffing levels to operate the master control broadcast content distribution function at the BEMC Network Operations Center have become nominally sufficient to support existing needs. However, there is still little or no leeway for absence and illnesses and no time available for staff development and training. Based on its involvement in planning for the future of the facility, the Alliance believes that an additional, trained operator is required. This funding will allow the agency to avoid overtime costs, provide sufficient staffing during peak operating periods and allow the agency to initiate and maintain an ongoing staff development program. With the full conversion to digital technology involving virtualized systems, ongoing training will be essential for this project now and in the future.

Although BEMC staff and all individuals and stations associated with the future of North Star have worked very hard over a number of years to optimize and limit the scope of work for needed upgrades, experience leads the Alliance to believe that unanticipated costs will likely be revealed during the replacement of broadcast and video conferencing equipment. To allow BEMC to deal with unforeseen issues, such as new and old equipment discovered to be incompatible, the Alliance is requesting an additional pool of support.

Fund	ALI	ALI Category/Purpose of Request	Additional Request	
			FY 2016	FY 2017
GRF	935410	Content Development, Acquisition and Distribution		
		Telecommunications Operating Subsidy	\$ 1,000,000	\$ 1,000,000
		Multimedia Projects Grant Program	\$ 350,000	\$ 350,000
		Annual total:	\$ 1,350,000	\$ 1,350,000

Since the beginning of the new century, direct state support of public television, radio and radio reading services has decreased by two-thirds due to challenges in the state budget. However, during that time, digital technology has allowed the educational affiliates to multiply their service to the public many times over through additional channels, classroom and on-line services and delivery of new types of content such as the Ohio Government Television. Even with all of the additional services for Ohioans, support from the General Assembly is down to only 2% of the combined budgets of the radio and TV stations. The Alliance requests the restoration of a portion of the funding that had been received in the past for the benefit of all citizens of the state.

Multimedia Grant funds allow public television stations to leverage their governmental and community investments to utilize their unique core competencies in creating compelling video content for educational use. In recent years, the stations have used these funds to work with the Department of Education to support career programs and other initiatives tied to local and state needs. With state funding for the grant program having decreased by 50% over the past decade, the Alliance asks for the restoration of a portion of that funding to allow the stations to move into additional and expanded partnerships with the DoE, the Governor's jobs initiatives and other agencies that will benefit from the television operations' media and educational expertise.

Fund	ALI	ALI Category/Purpose of Request	Additional Request	
			FY 2016	FY 2017
GRF	935412	Information Technology		
		Restore funding to replace previous DoE subsidy for video conferencing services to schools	\$ 150,000	\$ 150,000
		Annual total:	\$ 150,000	\$ 150,000

With the demand for eTech/BEMC video conferencing services for Ohio schools escalating in recent years, the Department of Education had allocated \$150,000 annually to support video conferencing services provided by the agency. In response, the BEMC has acted to significantly expand the capacity of their systems. Unfortunately, the DoE support has now been withdrawn at a time when schools are continuing to increase their use of video conferencing to reduce costs and provide students with a wider choice of course options. The Alliance requests that the legislature replace that lost funding in the agency budget to allow it to preserve and expand video conferencing services without shifting funds allocated for other purposes.

BEMC Additional Request - Total Budget Impact

Fund	ALI	ALI Name	Estimated	Executive Budget Recommendation		Additional Request		Total Annual Request
			FY 2015	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2016	FY 2017	
GRF	935401	Statehouse News Bureau	215,561	215,561	215,561			\$ 215,561
GRF	935402	Ohio Government Telecommunications Services	1,252,089	1,252,089	1,252,089			\$ 1,252,089
GRF	935408	General Operations	495,000	495,000	495,000	250,000	250,000	\$ 745,000
GRF	935409	Technology Operations	2,743,962	2,743,962	2,743,962	428,000	428,000	\$ 3,171,962
GRF	935410	Content Development, Acquisition and Distribution	2,607,094	2,607,094	2,607,094	1,350,000	1,350,000	\$ 3,957,094
GRF	935412	Information Technology	500,000	533,716	533,716	150,000	150,000	\$ 658,716
4F30	935603	Affiliate Services	50,000	4,000	4,000			\$ 4,000
4T20	935605	Government Television/Telecommunications Operating	25,000	7,000	7,000			\$ 7,000
5FK0	35608	Media Services	137,560	95,000	95,000			\$ 95,000
			8,026,266	7,953,422	7,953,422	2,178,000	2,178,000	\$ 10,131,422