

Chairman Burke, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Minority Member Carafo and the committee members, thank you for the opportunity to offer proponent testimony. I am Pam Green, President and CEO of Easter Seals TriState. We were founded by a group of parents passionate about ensuring their children with disabilities were given an opportunity to contribute to the workforce after they left school. Today, we serve more than 10,000 people, some of whom have diagnosed disabilities but many of whom face other barriers to full workforce participation, including veterans, at-risk youth, and people moving from welfare to work.

This year, we will provide paid pre-vocational training to around 400 people in three work centers, and we will provide job coaching and support to another 200 people with developmental disabilities who are working in the community. We also partner with school districts and Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities to manage eight different Project Search programs on-site at employers such as Fifth Third Bank and Mercy Hospital, where we provide a series of intern rotations that help students with disabilities leave high school with a connection to employment and the world of work.

I tell you all this to demonstrate that at Easter Seals TriState, we have never believed that one size fits all—particularly when it comes to employment. We believe facility-based prevocational services play a needed role in the lives of people with disabilities and their families. Can we do better? Absolutely. Can the state Department of Developmental Disabilities do more? Yes there is always room for improvement and growth. And we believe HB64 offers much promise for people with disabilities, from waiver redesign to a move away from institutional residential settings. We support Governor Kasich's Employment First executive order, and are supportive of the increased budget appropriation in HB64 that will provide more resources to ensure people with developmental disabilities have supports to help find and retain competitive employment.

But we do not believe that competitive community employment should be the only option any more than we believe sheltered employment should be the only option. Rather than this trap of binary either/or thinking, we should be leveraging resources to help more Ohioans who face barriers to employment. At one of our facilities, for example, we have tried to create a more integrated and inclusive environment by including consumers from other Easter Seals job training programs. Currently, we operate an advanced manufacturing training program for economically disadvantaged job seekers that combines classroom training with paid on-the-job training in our packaging and logistics center. The training aligns with OMJ's high demand occupations, and participants graduate with a certified logistics technician credential. Unfortunately, we must continue to separate people with disabilities from the Career Pathways trainees because some have criminal convictions. It's frustrating that in an environment with eyes-on trained staff, we can't allow folks with disabilities to work side by side with people who have convictions, and yet we are stating community employment is the preferred outcome, where the background of one's co-workers is unknown and supervision doesn't have specialized training. We cannot take something away from individuals with disabilities and families before something exists to take its place. We urge the state to stick to the plan they submitted to CMS that ensures a thoughtful and deliberate transition, and we urge the state to preserve the right of each individual to choose the setting most appropriate to their needs and desires.

We are particularly concerned that the federal government is designing a system built on the assumption of middle class values and access to supports when the reality is, disability

disproportionately affects families in poverty. For many of the families we serve, a child with a disability is just one more thing. The defining challenge in their lives is poverty. The fact hit home with me particularly hard when I encouraged Robert, a young man who is in one of our work centers, to pursue community employment. I told Robert I wanted him to get a job so he could make more money and demonstrate to businesses that they can get good employees from Easter Seals. Robert's response shook me. He told me that he knew he could probably work in the community, but right now, he said, "I'm working on making good decisions because I don't want to go back to jail." Robert shared he had been in foster care since he was nine years old, and had trouble controlling his anger, and had been involved in a robbery because he needed money.. Darryl, another young man we serve, told a visitor at Easter Seals that he liked being in our woodworking shop, because if it wasn't for that, quote, "I wouldn't be here-- because I could make a lot more money on the street" We have a responsibility as leaders in the great state of Ohio to not repeat the mistakes our society made in the past, but rather work concurrently making significant investments in community supports.

This is a time of tremendous change in disability services, fraught (yes) with fear, but also with possibility. Thank you for your deliberation and investment in the future of Ohioans with developmental disabilities. I would like to introduce my colleague Pandora Dupras.