

Janet Callison, State Director Best Buddies Ohio
Testimony before the 2017 Finance Subcommittee on Health and Medicaid
May 17, 2017

Good afternoon. My name is Janet Callison and I am the State Director for Best Buddies Ohio, a state affiliate of Best Buddies International. Founded in 1989, Best Buddies is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide opportunities for one-to-one friendships, leadership development, and integrated employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

Without formal opportunities to get to know one another, people with and without IDD are unlikely to develop true social connections on their own due to social, physical, and systemic barriers. The one-to-one peer mentoring friendships created through the Best Buddies Middle Schools, High Schools, and Colleges programs remove social barriers and assuage the effects of physical barriers that inhibit interaction between Ohioans with and without IDD. Consequently, participants with IDD become more socially integrated in their school or community, have increased involvement in leisure activities with a friend, and demonstrate improved social interactions. They are more employable, more independent, and more included in their communities.

In a moment you will hear from my son, Silas. As a teenager with Down syndrome, he often finds it challenging to establish meaningful friendships with his typical peers. The mission of inclusion drew me to Best Buddies as I began to search for ways to increase my son's success in high school. Beginning in 2014, and with the support of Best Buddies International, a dedicated group of parents, professionals, and friends successfully raised the funds needed to open a state affiliate office in Ohio. Since opening in early 2016, we have expanded Best Buddies inclusion programs to 19 schools, launched an employer engagement initiative to cultivate greater support of integrated employment, and launched our public speaking program, Best Buddies Ambassadors.

We are excited about our growth in our first year of operation, but we are humbled by the 40 middle schools, high schools, and colleges that are now on our waiting list. Securing support from the state of Ohio would empower Best Buddies to fill a gap in community-based services offered to Ohioans. With this funding, we would expand from 19 school-based chapters and 1,000 participants to 60 schools and 3,000 participants, an increase of 20 schools and 1,000 per year, by the end of the biennium.

Now, I am pleased to introduce Olivia Girardi and Silas Callison, participants in Best Buddies at Grandview Heights High School, to share how Best Buddies has impacted their lives.

Olivia Girardi, Vice President (2017-2018) and Participant, Best Buddies Grandview Heights High School
Silas Callison, Buddy Director and Participant, Best Buddies Grandview Heights High School

Olivia: Hello, my name is Olivia Girardi. I am a sophomore at Grandview Heights High School. I have been involved in Best Buddies for four years. Next year I will serve as the Vice President of our chapter.

Silas: Hi, my name is Silas Callison and I am also a sophomore at Grandview Heights High School. I have been the Grandview Buddy Director for three years.

Olivia: Silas and I became closer when Best Buddies came to our school in 2014. We have had a lot of fun times. We walked in the Best Buddies Ohio Friendship Walk, hung out at our car wash fundraiser, carved pumpkins together, and much more. Best Buddies has impacted me by helping me bond with all my peers at school.

Silas: Best Buddies creates a friendly environment and opportunities for new experiences. Best Buddies has encouraged me to have a bigger part in my community. I have made new friends, been active in wrestling and track, managed the football team, and had opportunities for public speaking. Everywhere I go in Grandview I feel included and it is a REALLY good feeling. Ohio needs more Best Buddies chapters because everyone should have the chance to engage in new opportunities.

Olivia: Everyone – with and without disabilities – is impacted by Best Buddies. It has provided many opportunities for me to learn from new people and to feel a stronger sense of community. The lessons we learn, the stories we hear, and the friendships we make will stay with us for the rest of our lives. I hope everyone in Ohio has the chance to gain from what Best Buddies has to offer. Thank you for supporting Best Buddies.