

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Burke and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the allowing me to testify today. I am the director of the Adaptive Sports Program of Ohio, which provides opportunities for individuals with physical disabilities to engage in sports. The reason we exist, which can be hard to believe, is because there is a minority population that currently does not have an equitable opportunity to engage in sports in their communities or schools. Despite federal law mandating that schools offer extracurricular activities to students with disabilities, thousands of Ohio students are sitting on the sidelines and not participating in sports. It would never be tolerated for any other minority group to be told that they don't belong in school sports, that the school has nothing to offer them except the position of water boy, statistician, team manager or photographer, or that they should take up a different extra-curricular that does not include physical activity. I believe this discrimination is unintentional, but still unacceptable, and occurs in districts across Ohio.

Adaptive Sports Program of Ohio is changing this, thanks to the help of the Ohio Legislature. We are here today to ask you to maintain our earmark in the ODE budget and increase it to \$500,000 each year so that we can continue to change this. During the current and previous budget cycle, ASPO has received \$50,000 annually to create an adaptive sports pilot program that could have the potential to scale into districts across the state. Despite being underfunded, ASPO successfully launched districtwide wheelchair basketball teams in 5 school districts in Northeast Ohio: Tallmadge, Wooster, Massillon, Plain Local and Austintown. The most significant barrier for school districts to implement this on their own is the cost of equipment – each sport wheelchair costs \$2,000. We've provided all 5 districts with these wheelchairs (\$120,000). The House reinstated our earmark at \$250,000, and we are extremely grateful, however, doubling this amount to \$500,000 will increase the amount of schools we can serve. This financial support will enable us to:

- Provide equipment to school districts for the creation or continued support of a wheelchair basketball team - our goal is to add 10 additional school districts in the next 3 years.
- Provide adaptive sport training for coaches and program administrators.
- Directly manage a maximum of 5 teams as needed by the school district.
- Monitor participating school districts to ensure program success.
- Continue to develop the Interscholastic Adaptive Sports League infrastructure for the governance and oversight of the adaptive sport teams, as well as organize and host the State Championship.

The school districts also invest in their teams and provide team uniforms, facility space, referees, bus transportation and, in some instances, provide a coaching stipend.

Through this program, students experience physical transformation, academic improvements, social inclusion and increased self-confidence and efficacy, which directly impacts their future. We complete pre and post season testing on each athlete, to measure their physical improvements and administer a quality of life survey. The survey results showed that 95% of participants experienced academic improvements, 68% experienced increased independence, 45% social and emotional improvements, and 82% experienced physical improvements. As you can see from these results, this is about more than just providing sports. This program is about real, documented life change for an underserved population that has the highest rates of unemployment, physical inactivity and poorer health status compared to any other subgroup. They fare worse across a broad range of health indicators and the social determinants of health than the nondisabled population. The **Ohio State Health Improvement Plan** has identified individuals with disabilities as a priority population with worse outcomes than the overall Ohio

population. 18% of Ohio Medicaid enrollees consist of the aged, blind and disabled. They are a small group of big spenders - making 50% of total expenditures. And, they achieve only a 68% graduation rate.

Governor DeWine, in his State of the State address said, "education is key to equality and opportunity", that "we must be fierce and passionate advocates of the defenseless" including those "living in the shadows of life", and that "everyone deserves an opportunity to succeed...and live up to their God-given potential." Our students with disabilities are those living in the shadows and they need your help. These are unmet needs, not provided by school districts or Special Olympics. ASPO is well qualified to assist schools and scale this program across the State. We are offering a uniform, organized and well governed approach to meeting the needs of this often forgotten and overlooked population. This small investment will serve as a catalyst and have a significant impact in the lives of this underserved population for years to come. Together, we can improve their education, their health, and their quality of life. Thank you.