



Advocates for Ohio's Future

Testimony to the Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Committee
Sub-HB 110, Main Operating Budget FY2022-FY2023
April 15, 2021

Chairman Oelslager, Vice Chair Plummer, Ranking Member Crawley, and members of the House Finance Committee, my name is Kelsey Bergfeld and I am the Director of Advocates for Ohio's Future (AOF). AOF is a nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of over 500 state and local health and human services policy, advocacy and provider organizations that strive to strengthen families and communities through public funding for health, human services, and early care & education. We work to empower and support nonprofit organizations in the critical work they do, especially as it relates to lifting up the most vulnerable among us. A list of AOF Steering Committee members is attached to our testimony and also available at www.advocatesforohio.org.

A full year into the coronavirus pandemic and economic fallout, we recognize that it will take many months, if not years, for Ohio's families, businesses and communities to recover. As case numbers fall and vaccination rates climb, families across our state continue to struggle with basic needs like food security and housing, the weight of the pandemic on their mental health and finding employment in a different workforce landscape.

This budget holds opportunities for our elected leaders to invest in Ohio's workforce, families and community services to ensure all Ohioans recover successfully from the economic and public health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Increases in basic needs assistance and targeted, smart investments in work supports for Ohioans and their families, that last the duration of the economic fallout—not just the public health crisis—will do more to support our recovery and empower our citizens to help themselves as soon as it is deemed safe.

We were pleased to see a great deal of worthy investments and proposals included in the sub-bill:

Broadband Access and Affordability

We applaud the House's decision to include the robust investments in broadband access and infrastructure of HB 2 (Carfagna, Stewart) in Sub-HB 110. This is a significant investment and will connect Ohioans to vital broadband services.

While we support and appreciate the goal of the broadband investments in Sub-HB110, we, along with a number of our member organizations suggest three amendments that align with the overall goal of increasing broadband connectivity for Ohio residents.

Currently, Sub-HB110 excludes government and quasi-governmental entities from the definition of Broadband Provider, meaning they are not permitted to submit a grant application. Consistent with testimony that was provided in the House, we believe **the definition should not exclude these entities**. In some communities, the best entity to expand service may be a government entity and there are models across Ohio where a municipality has been providing reliable, hi-speed broadband service to their residents at a competitive cost.

In addition, we would suggest **including cost of service under the scoring criteria for proposals before grants are awarded and include price points for service, in addition to addresses served, in annual grant award reports and the Authority grant program report**. These additions and attention to cost of service before and after grant awards are made will encourage providers to ensure their prices are competitive and more affordable for Ohioans in need.

At a time where broadband access and connectivity will be a vital factor in economic recovery for both families and communities in the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic, equitable, affordable access to broadband becomes a crucial factor in the reality of two Ohio's—one laden with greater job and education opportunities, better health outcomes and overall quality of life—while the other is left behind. Digital inclusion and digital literacy must be addressed to achieve the vision outlined by Ohio's Broadband Strategy—where all Ohioans have access to this vital resource.

We urge you to **consider ways to help low-income families from around the state afford high-speed internet access and incentivize internet service providers to update and improve their networks in low-income areas to increase opportunities for both families and businesses**.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Programs and Funding

We were pleased to see the inclusion of requirements for ODJFS to prepare, release and update their TANF spending plan on a predictable basis. This spending plan is vital for stakeholders and agency partners in evaluating spending and long-term planning across TANF programs and gauging the efficacy of programs and needs of vulnerable Ohio families.

However, over the past two and a half decades funding for core TANF programs, like cash assistance and one-time emergency assistance for families has become harder for people to access. Anecdotal data suggests that very little assistance is actually provided in some areas of the state.

Sub-HB 110 includes over \$60 million in TANF Block Grant earmarks over the biennium. These dollars are notoriously difficult to spend in accordance with guidelines. We fear a significant portion of these earmarked dollars end up being returned to the TANF Stabilization Fund also known as the TANF “underspend.”

As TANF funds go unspent, they get reallocated to one-off programs that lack long-term sustainability rather than invested back into the core TANF programs that are designed to keep families from losing their jobs or remain together in times of economic turmoil.

In an effort to increase transparency and accountability of TANF earmark investments, **we ask you include review and reporting requirements of how the earmark dollars are used and make the reports available**

to the public. This will afford the General Assembly as well as the general public a clearer picture of which organizations are successful stewards of these sought-after dollars.

Over the past two and a half decades funding for core TANF programs, like cash assistance and one-time emergency assistance for families has become harder for people to access. Anecdotal data suggests that very little assistance is actually provided in some areas of the state.

We also ask that you in the long-term, **support the immediate, emergency needs of low-income children and families by investing in the core components of the TANF program including emergency assistance, work supports (PRC), food, housing, income-support, and child care and ensure unspent TANF dollars are reinvested into sustainable core programs to increase the security of low-income families and expand job training and work opportunities.**

Food Security

Food insecurity and unemployment rates are at an all-time high due to the unforeseen effects of the coronavirus pandemic and the deep recession that created the perfect storm for millions of Ohioans and their families. Food insecurity is a symptom of larger, systemic issues: poverty, unemployment, under employment, part-time and contingent jobs, income inequality, insufficient wages, racial inequity, weakened social safety nets, rising housing costs, food access gaps, and much more.

We greatly appreciate the inclusion of an amendment that provides an additional \$5 million in FY 2022 for our partners at the Ohio Association of Foodbanks from one-time federal pass through Coronavirus relief funding. This increase brings additional hunger support for Ohioans from \$7 million in the as introduced version of the budget to \$12 million in the House.

We are also encouraged by the provision included in Sub-HB110 that requires ODJFS to submit an application to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for participation in the Elderly Simplified Application Project within the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Ohio is an aging state and affording seniors the proposed flexibility in recertification frequency with help tremendously with senior hunger, reduce barriers for SNAP retention and reduce county workloads.

Adult Protective Services (APS)

Unfortunately, elder Ohioans face the prospect of elder abuse in the form of financial exploitation from scam artists, friends or family and the grim prospect of suffering physical, sexual or emotional abuse. Older adults may find themselves in situations of neglect, or self-neglect, which can result in deterioration of physical and mental health. Social distancing protocols necessary to keep elder Ohioans safe and the rise of scam artists over the past year have made this population more vulnerable over the last year.

For these and many other reasons, we are grateful for increased investment in Sub-HB110. At current budget levels, each county receives around \$45,000 for APS. This proposed increase would provide \$65,000 per county in Ohio, enough to fund one full time APS caseworker. We believe this investment will provide a better spectrum of services for older adults to live safe and healthy lives in their communities and in facilities.

AOF encourages Ohio's legislative leaders to invest in Ohio's workforce, families and community services to ensure all Ohioans recover successfully from the economic and public health crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. A balanced approach to the state budget should examine current tax expenditures and new revenue opportunities to solve Ohio's most pressing needs.

Our children are counting on all of us to create the Ohio they deserve. We want to live in a state where we create opportunity, care for and invest in people, and focus on equitable recovery. This budget has the potential to strengthen Ohio's families and communities, and increase opportunity for Ohioans as our state continues to recover. Targeted, smart investments in human services—including food assistance, health care, early education, behavioral health, long-term services and supports, housing and child welfare—promote and support family stability and self-sufficiency and encourage families to thrive.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony on Sub-HB 110. We are happy to provide additional information upon request.

Advocates for Ohio's Future

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