



Advocates for Ohio's Future

Testimony to the Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
HB 110, Main Operating Budget FY2022-FY2023
March 4, 2021

Chairman Roemer, Ranking Member West, and members of the House Finance Health and Human Services Subcommittee, 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.

The following budget recommendations create opportunity, care for and invest in people, and focus on equitable recovery for Ohio's families, businesses and communities.

Health Care Access

As you consider the budget, we ask that you remember how critical health care coverage is through the Medicaid program, especially during a public health crisis. Health comes first. Health allows people to effectively care for their families, acquire and maintain a job, and participate in the community. Whether because a person is older, has a disability, struggles with addiction, is challenged to work because of physical or mental impairment, or has lost their job through no fault of their own, Medicaid is critical to health.

In an effort to ensure eligible Ohioans have continuous access to high-quality health care as the state continues to manage through the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, we ask that you **maintain Medicaid eligibility without barriers or cuts so that Ohioans seeking health care and mental health and addiction treatment can continue to access vital services during these multiple public health and economic crises.**

New Voluntary Community Engagement Program

As introduced, HB 110 includes a new voluntary community engagement program to “encourage work among the able-bodied working age population.” This program is intended to connect Medicaid beneficiaries with training opportunities that will lead to increased earning potential, promote economic stability and financial independence, and provide participants with the opportunity to improve their quality of life through work.

AOF agrees with the goal to create opportunities for individuals to link with meaningful work and community engagement programs and to invest in a variety of workforce strategies to connect job seekers with available jobs so long as these opportunities remain fully voluntary and the decision to participate or not participate in them has no effect on the eligibility status of Medicaid recipients in the short and long-term.

Broadband Access and Affordability

Today more than 300,000 households in Ohio representing close to 1 million Ohioans lack access to high-speed internet. In some parts of our state, communities have little or no access to the internet because of gaps in or complete absence of digital infrastructure.

Though broadband access was rising in importance before the pandemic, coronavirus has turned the internet into a critical lifeline. Over the last year, the internet has become the primary way many Ohioans work, go to school, access healthcare, search for employment, seek assistance and connect with friends and family.

Ohio communities and families with limited or no access to high-speed internet now clearly suffer a disadvantage in the classroom and in the workplace, as well as a competitive disadvantage in today’s technology-infused economy. In today’s socially and physically distanced world, the lack of connectivity results in limited opportunities and can impact a person’s wellbeing and quality of life.

We applaud the Governor’s proposed robust investments for broadband access and infrastructure in HB 110 and understand a portion of those investments have been passed by this chamber in HB 2, while the remaining dollars are to be included in a separate economic recovery package.

As conversations regarding broadband access and infrastructure continue, we urge you to consider that for many Ohioans, the main barrier to broadband access is not geography, but cost. In the city of Cleveland, 27% of households had no internet access of any kind (including smartphones) according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Similar large shares of the populations in Toledo, Dayton, Lorain, and Youngstown are unconnected and under-connected. The monthly bill for home high speed internet connection in most Ohio communities is now at least \$60 to \$70 per month—an amount too great for many families already struggling to pay rent and keep food on the table.

At a time where broadband access and connectivity will be a vital factor in economic recovery for both families and communities during and 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.

Though broadband dollars are no longer included in HB 110, 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

The TANF Program provides grant funds to states to provide families with financial assistance and related support services. In Ohio, TANF resources are used to provide cash assistance payments, administered as the Ohio Works First (OWF) Program. TANF funds may also be used to provide short-term benefits and other types of services to TANF-eligible families, mainly families with incomes under 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL).

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on Black and brown Ohioans and families experiencing poverty. State leaders need to ensure families with low- or no-income, many of whom have been out of work for several months, can continue to put food on the table, pay the rent, and get basic necessities like toilet paper and medication. Others are front line workers making low wages, struggling to afford child care and healthcare. TANF is a critical support to help low-income families become stable and secure.

The following recommendations will immediately support families who continue to struggle from the effects and economic crises:

- **Stabilize low-income families in crisis by allocating \$50 million from Ohio's TANF funds for one-time emergency assistance through the Prevention, Retention, and Contingency (PRC) program.** This could provide one-time payments of \$500 to 100,000 families with immediate, emergency needs and move money directly into Ohio's economy.
- Research shows that living in deep poverty compromises children's ability to grow and negatively impacts their earnings, income, and health as adults. The cash assistance component of the federal TANF program, called "Ohio Works First" (OWF), supports the health and safety of children and families of very low-income by providing direct cash assistance to help with food, safe housing, health care and other basic necessities. **Increasing the basic OWF cash grant by a minimum of \$100 a month, to an average payment of \$311 a month per recipient,** would better support the health and safety of children and families in the pandemic recession.
- Everyone deserves health, security and a roof over their head. When children have safe, stable housing they have better health, perform better at school and are have more opportunities in the future. The pandemic has exacerbated housing insecurity. **Allocating \$25 million annually from Ohio's TANF surplus for the "Housing Now for Homeless Families" program would quickly rehouse homeless children and families and provide much-needed stability.** This would help divert thousands of children and families from overcrowded homeless shelters to safe housing.

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.

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.

We 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.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely exacerbated these real-world realities that now affect millions of Ohioans through no fault of their own. Nationwide, the number of households struggling to put enough food on the table spiked last spring as the pandemic's economic effects took hold. It remained nearly three times pre-pandemic levels over the summer and rose even higher in recent months.

Food hardship has disproportionately affected households with children, especially Black and Latino households. Nearly 1 in 5 (18.1 percent) of Ohioans experienced food insecurity in 2020, meaning they didn't always know how they would afford or access their next meal.

More than 1 in 4 Ohio kids (27.1 percent) lived in food insecure households in 2020. Most recently, the U.S. Census Bureau's Pulse Survey found that nearly 3 in 10 Ohio households with children (28.9 percent) experienced food insecurity in December 2020.² Families with children have been crippled by lost savings, increased household debt, and rising food prices.

Though the Governor's proposed budget includes a \$7 million allocation in CARES Act funds for FY 2022, funding for foodbanks remains flat. AOF supports the Ohio Association of Foodbanks' request for **\$45 million per year in the biennium to address food insecurity and direct state dollars to Ohio families who need it most.** The request includes \$30 million to support food purchases and \$12 million (\$1 million per month) toward non-food essential items that can't be purchased with SNAP, such as personal hygiene items and household cleaning items.

Eligibility for Publicly Funded Child Care

We applaud Governor DeWine's continuing mission to invest in our future - our children, despite challenging times. We have a moral and economic imperative to reach out and support at-risk children and their families to ensure all Ohioans, no matter their neighborhood, are given the chance to succeed and climb the ladder up and out of poverty.

Ohio offers quality care and education to at risk 0-4 year olds through publicly funded child care (PFCC) and public preschool. The vast majority of Ohio kids who receive publicly funded early childhood experiences do so through child care programs. These early childhood programs for 0-4 year olds support the essential development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills for kids as they prepare to enter kindergarten and are a necessary support for working families.

We are thankful that HB 110 includes a slight increase in new GRF funding to expand access to child care by increasing the level of initial eligibility to 138 percent of poverty from 130 percent, and 150 percent for children with special needs. However, **the goal of AOF is to see initial eligibility for public child care assistance restored to 200 percent of poverty, as proposed in HB 145, a bipartisan effort, which will allow thousands of children and families to take advantage of enrichment programs for early learners while supporting low-income working parents.** The important investments we see in this budget - and the investments necessary to improve the system - should be supported by predictable and sustainable state-based funding now, and in the future.

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, AOF is suggesting that **funding for APS be increased in the ODJFS budget (line item 600534) from \$4.23 million each year of the biennium to \$10 million each year of the biennium.** 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, plus an additional amount to be distributed to counties on a yet to be determined formula. 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.

Equity should also be an explicit consideration in constructing the budget. Laws and policies have institutionalized racism and bias against marginalized groups. Ohio should allocate resources and services to at-risk populations to ensure an individual's well-being and success are not predictable by race, class, geography, language, gender, or other relevant social factors.

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 HB 110. We are happy to provide additional information upon request.

Advocates for Ohio's Future

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