

**TESTIMONY TO THE
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE
STATE SENATOR THERESA GAVARONE, CHAIR
APRIL 20, 2021**

Chairman Cross and members of the Higher Education Subcommittee of the House Finance Committee, good morning. I am Philip C. Richter, Executive Director of the Ohio Elections Commission, and am giving testimony on behalf of the Commission regarding the Commission's budget for the next biennium. Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to address the subcommittee on behalf of the Commission.

Since the Ohio Elections Commission commenced operations as an independent state agency on January 1, 1996, over 21,000 cases have been filed with the Commission. In addition, 72 advisory opinions have been issued, with one pending further consideration by the Commission.

Until last year, the Commission had carried out its mission with only three (3) employees; myself as Executive Director and Staff Attorney, and 2 very capable administrative assistants, but with the budget reduction imposed on all agencies and the remote working mandate, I was obligated to relinquish my part-time employee who had worked for the Commission for almost 28 years. Along with the 7 Commission members, comprised of three (3) Democrats, three (3) Republicans and one (1) independent, the nine (9) persons on the Commission's payroll consume well over 80% of the Commission's total budget. Although small, the staff of the Commission has been able to efficiently and effectively handle the array of cases filed with the Commission on a consistent basis. The Commission's caseload has been fairly consistent since the Commission became an independent agency, aside from losing jurisdiction over Ohio's false statement statutes in recent years. The Commission has continued to have a steady caseload of campaign finance related cases submitted to us from the 88 County Boards of

Elections as well as from the office of the Secretary of State, in addition to complaints filed with us by individuals across the state.

As with the Commission staff, the operational needs of the Commission continue to be fairly consistent, increasing only because of rising prices, generally such as higher postage costs and increased health insurance premiums, which are all beyond the control of Commission personnel. My staff and I have worked diligently to limit the Commission's expenditure levels. Further, salary increases have been limited throughout the Commission's existence with staff receiving only step increases and my salary has only being increased twice, in almost 14 years. The Commission has consistently met its obligations with fewer and fewer dollars, and it appears it will be obligated to do so again for this upcoming biennium. This prospective budget reflects a consistent approach to the previous biennia and was reduced as required by the Office of Budget and Management. This budget will simply allow the Commission to continue to maintain its basic operations, now with one fewer employee, and contains a more realistic reliance on the Elections Commission Fund, based on the historic level of receipts to that fund. After essentially receiving consistent cuts to its budget starting in the mid-2000s, I believe that this recommended amount will allow the Commission to effectively operate but is still less than the Commission was allotted in fiscal year 2009.

There have been a variety of factors that have allowed the Commission to live within its means during recent budget cycles, and I am certain that this biennium will be no different. Off and on the Commission has experienced periods where it operated with less than a full contingent of members which has saved the operational budget \$4,000 in 2019, \$4,000 in 2017, \$16,000 in 2016, \$30,000 in 2013, \$4100 in 2012, \$18,000 in 2011, \$12,500 in 2010, \$14,500 in 2009 and \$12,500 in 2008. Moving into the Riffe Center in 2015 has save approximately \$20,000 per year in the Commission's budget

from it's previous location in the Wyandotte Building. I believe that I, and my staff, have been very responsible with the funds supplied to the Commission to carry out the functions of the Commission, often to my own detriment.

I believe that this budget recommendation on behalf of the Commission will continue to represent the frugal manner in which this Commission has conducted its operations since becoming an independent agency and continues to reflect the economical manner in which the Commission will maintain its operations through this biennium. Through difficult budget times, I believe that the Commission has continued to move cases through its processes and continues to perform its basic functions in an efficient and effective manner.

On behalf of the seven members of the Elections Commission, I again want to thank you for the opportunity to address this honorable subcommittee. I will do my best to answer any additional questions that you may have regarding the Commission, its current budget, this budget request, as well as our overall operations.

Thank you very much.