



The Ability Center

**Testimony on House Bill 74 before the Senate Transportation Committee
Katherine Hunt Thomas, Director of Advocacy and Disability Rights Attorney
The Ability Center of Greater Toledo
March 18, 2021**

Chairwoman Kunze, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. I am Katherine Hunt Thomas, Director of Advocacy and Disability Rights Attorney for The Ability Center of Greater Toledo, a Center for Independent Living serving seven counties in northwest Ohio. The Ability Center advocates, educates, partners, and provides services supporting people with disabilities to thrive within their community.

I am here today with two asks: I ask this Committee to support funding of \$150 Million per year for regional transit authorities in this bi-ennium budget, and I ask this committee to support the legislative language proposed by our transit authority, TARTA, as it was introduced in the Governor's version of the transportation budget.

We need to supply more funding to support strong, effective public transit to support the independence of Ohioans with disabilities.

It is no secret that strong, effective public transit systems are necessary to support people with disabilities to live independently in the community. Many people with disabilities are unable to drive because of their disability, so they rely on public transit to get to work, medical appointments, to go shopping, and for socialization. Yet the state of Ohio has traditionally underfunded our public transit systems. A recent study funded by the Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council found that transportation was the number one challenge for Ohioans with disabilities.¹ In that same survey, the number one concern of respondents was having no access to public transit at all.² When asked, most respondents wanted to use public transit to get to work and medical appointments.³ Public transit meets a basic need for people with disabilities – to go to work and the doctor – but it is currently insufficient in many areas of Ohio to meet that need.

The simple answer to providing better public transit in Ohio is to provide more funding for Ohio's public transit systems. A 2015 Transit Needs Study produced by the Ohio Department of Transportation found that public transit systems in Ohio, at that time, needed \$150 M line item

¹ Ohio Colleges of Medicine Government Resource Center, Transportation Challenges for Ohioans with Disabilities: Fact Sheet (2017), available at <https://ddc.ohio.gov/Resource-Library/Publications/Transportation-Challenges-for-Ohoians-with-Disabilities-Fact-Sheet>.

² Id.

³ Id.



The Ability Center

just to be able to *maintain* current transit service.⁴ I ask that this Committee support \$150 M in funding per year for public transit systems over the next bi-ennium.

To adequately serve people with disabilities in northwest Ohio, we must be able to expand our public transit system, TARTA, county- wide.

I also ask that this committee adopt the legislative language proposed by Toledo's regional transit authority, TARTA, as it was incorporated into the Governor's budget. The Toledo region is the only major metropolitan area in Ohio to not have a county-wide public transit system. Our regional transit system has tried four times to get through an overly burdensome statutory process, which requires unanimous consent of all TARTA Member Communities just to place the issue of expanding public transit on the ballot. With each attempt, just one Member community has resisted, so Lucas County voters have never even been able to weigh in on the issue.

The amended language proposed by TARTA would not circumvent this process completely, but it would change the statute to allow a majority of Member communities to make that decision rather than requiring unanimous consent. Even with the amendment, a majority of Member communities would have to agree, and Lucas County voters would have to vote to expand public transit in Lucas County. This is a reasonable ask, and a similar change has been made to benefit Montgomery County.

In the meantime, there are areas of Lucas County that are barred from people with disabilities because those areas are not Member communities of TARTA. People with disabilities have reported having no way to get home from a hospital, patronize shops, or travel to jobs that lie outside the current Member communities of TARTA. Others have reported moving away from areas that are not Member communities of TARTA because it was too difficult to live in areas of our county that have no public transportation. Expanding TARTA service county-wide is essential to the mobility and independence of people with disabilities in our region. TARTA should have the right let Lucas County voters decide whether that is something they want to support.

Thus, I ask that you accept the legislative language proposed by TARTA as it was included in the Governor's proposed Transportation Budget. By supporting a change from unanimous to majority Member community consent, you will help us accomplish our goal of ensuring the independence of people with disabilities in our region.

Thank you, again, Madam Chair, and members of the committee for the opportunity to submit testimony today.

⁴ Ohio Department of Transportation, Ohio Statewide Transit Needs Study (2015), available at <https://www.transportation.ohio.gov/static/Programs/Transit/Publications/OhioStatewideTransitNeedsStudyFinalReport.pdf>.