



**Testimony on SFY 24/25 Operating Budget
House Finance Committee**

Chairman Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeny, and esteemed committee members,

I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Jessica Toivonen and I am the Executive Director of Blossom Hill, Inc., and we are located in Westlake, North Royalton, and Parma, all in Cuyahoga County. We are an Intermediate Care Facility (ICF) that provides residential services, as well as supported living and respite services through home and community-based waiver programs administered by the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD). Our team of about 100 employees are proud to provide essential services to nearly 80 Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

I am very supportive of the budget initiatives outlined by Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for DODD. The changing labor landscape and accompanying shortage of workers, including direct support professionals (DSP), threatens our ability to provide the critical supports upon which the people we serve and their families rely. The budget proposed in HB 33 is a good foundation to help our system combat these many changes.

Staffing shortages are not unique to our industry, they are happening in many professions and businesses large and small. What is unique about our staffing shortage is the extreme impact low staffing has on the people we serve and the people who we have the potential to serve. Despite advances in technology, we will always require in-person, hands-on care for our individuals. The bottom line is that **our staff keep people alive**, and the dire impact of proper reimbursement cannot be understated.

Currently this year, we are down by 15 staff members from the same time last year. That translates to 840 open hours per week, which is a significant gap for the 36 individuals we care for in our ICF group homes. **Hiring and retaining Direct Support Professionals continues to be our biggest challenge** as we are only able to offer \$14/hour for a Direct Support Professional while big box stores like Target and Amazon pay \$15+/hour. To keep our individuals safe and provide our standard excellent level of care for another 55 years, we will be forced to make very hard decisions about the number of individuals we will be able to serve.

The Governor's proposed budget initiatives, guided by the leadership of Director Hauck, is a great foundation to reinforce and rebuild the services provided by Blossom Hill, Inc. With these budget initiatives, Ohioans with disabilities will continue to receive the vital employment services organizations like mine provide. **We encourage this committee to approve the Governor's budget proposal for DODD and to invest additional dollars through budget amendment HC0656 into these vital services to raise direct support professional wages to at least an average of \$20.64.**

With your leadership, together we can ensure these services are available to the Ohioans that so greatly need them! **Thank you again, for the opportunity and privilege to bring my concerns before you today.**

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