



**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 Melinda Kale and I am the CEO of Work Leads to Independence, and we are located in Bowling Green Ohio in Wood County and we provide services in 6 counties. We are an organization that provides Adult Day Services, Employment Services, Non-Medical Transportation, Group Employment, Individual Employment, Career Planning, Pre-ets and Voc Habilitation administered by the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD) and Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD). Our team of 32 employees are proud to provide essential services to approximately 150 Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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

In the current workforce crisis, it has ironically created employment opportunities for the people that we support in Employment Services. The employment of these individuals helps support the public sector businesses in their workforce crisis and the trickledown effect of these individuals' employment is less need of public assistance funds for them and they in turn become tax contributors. Unfortunately, due to not being able to offer competitive wages for support staff, we then are unable to provide the services needed for the individuals to be successful in these opportunities.

Another one of our services, Day Programming, is also affected by the inability to provide competitive wages. Unlike the public sector businesses, it is not an option for us to reduce hours or close for a day. Staffing needed for the level of care that is to be provided, is jeopardized by us not being able to provide competitive wages, based on the current waiver rates. These rates are out of alignment for the essential services that we provide for the health and safety of these individuals. We need to be able to provide realistic wages to those that provide this high level of quality care.

When we reference the proposed budget initiatives, it is imperative to understand that we are asking for funding to support DSP staff wages in order to ensure that people with developmental disabilities do not go without services that they need and that have already been authorized for through our system. We need to recognize that DSPs are essential workers, who are in the field providing critical and necessary supports. Providing these requires specialized skills and competencies and unfortunately this is not reflected in their low wages and limited benefits. They should not have to work multiple jobs or not be able to live above the poverty line.

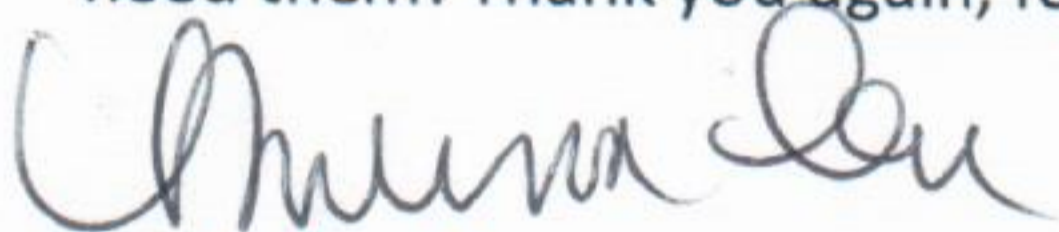
If you would, please imagine yourself in the following scenario. You have a family member that relies on the DD system to provide services and supports for their daily living needs. However, due to the shortage of DSPs these services are no longer an option for them due to agencies, such as Work Leads to Independence, being unable to retain qualified employees because of non-competitive wages and benefits. The result of this is that you are not able to maintain your employment. If you lose your job or have to quit, the financial loss could result in your family having to utilize the already overburdened social services and public benefit programs.

DSP's are most often the primary supports and help with the integration and engagement for these people within the community. High turnover and vacancies and low wages have devastating effects on the DSP's and the people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. During the pandemic, we saw first hand the effect on the people receiving services when they experienced withdrawal from the loss of employment or services because of the isolation. The reduction of being able to engage in face to face contact outside their households results in regression for them and the effects of this deprivation can extend long-term during their lives.

I value the team I work with and I am here to advocate for them and assure them that what they do to create quality life choices to the persons receiving DD services is recognized statewide.

The Governor's proposed budget initiatives, guided by the leadership of Director Hauck and Director Miller, is a great foundation to reinforce and rebuild the services provided by Work Leads to Independence. With these budget initiatives, Ohioans with disabilities will continue to receive the vital employment services organizations like our team provides. We encourage this committee to approve the Governor's budget proposal for DODD ODD 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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