



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

REM Ohio
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**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 Buffie LaBelle and I a Regional Director for REM Ohio. We are a state wide agency providing services in 35 counties throughout the state. I oversee services in our Eastern Region which encompasses Summit, Stark, Trumbull, Portage, Mahoning, and Medina counties. We are an organization that provides intermediate care facilities for individuals with intellectual disabilities as well as residential, Ohio Shared Living, day, and employment services through the home and community-based waiver program administered by the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD). Our team of 1000 employees are proud to provide essential services to 900 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 on which the people we serve and their families rely.

Our field is truly in a staffing crisis that was building even before the pandemic and is at a critical level. We do not have enough staff. In the past year, in my region alone, we have had to close 3 homes and condense our number of residential locations. We have multiple homes that have vacancies that we have not been able to fill, because we don't have staff to provide for the additional needs. As one of the larger providers in Summit County, we are generally a provider the county board counts on the help when there is a need. However, we have had to continually turn down opportunities to serve more people, and take on homes looking for new providers. We have had to cut back staffing ratio's to bare minimum. And while the basic needs of our individuals are being met by our great team of dedicated staff that have remained, the people we support are not able to fully participate in their community as they would like due to a lack of staffing to take them where they want to go.

Due to this lack of staffing, our managers are working non-stop. This has led to an increase in turnover in our home supervisors and program director level staff. These positions are critical in ensuring quality of care, staff training and oversight. As a Regional Director, I'm working shifts to fill-in and cover gaps on a regular basis as are all the agency leaders I know within REM (as well as colleges from other agencies across the state that I have spoken with). While working shifts is one of the best parts of my job, and is how I started out in the field some 30 years ago, it puts a strain on operating the business (overseeing hiring, training, budgeting/planning, payroll, dealing with staffing issues, etc.) when my leaders and myself are working overnight shifts, evenings, weekends because we do not have the staff to cover the hours needed. We are all exhausted. We are losing DSP's due to low wages, but we are losing our managers and leaders due to long hours, and the stress of not having enough people to do the job.

The individuals we support, and their families, and those desperately waiting for needed services, are the ones truly affected by all of this. Our team of staff, supervisors and directors are great, but we are serve are not getting our best, they are getting what we have left to give. So, basic needs are met, but

helping someone get to church, or a family event, or even out to get a haircut or nails done, are things that they are missing out on. We are no longer always able to send staff with individuals needing emergency care as the house manager is working with the rest of the home and cannot leave, and other supervisors are also working. Family members, who are often elderly and dealing with their own health issues, end up having to pick up slack like going to ER, running appointments, and in some cases even help cover staffing needs. In one example, we had to give notice on a gentleman that needed 1:1 staffing and his mom had to take that on for weeks while they looked for another provider, and still has to regularly "fill in" when needed. Finally, I speak with families every week who are at their breaking point and in need of help, but they cannot find a quality place for their son or daughter to call home because many providers are not able to take on new individuals.

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 REM Ohio. **We encourage this subcommittee to approve the Governor's budget proposal for DODD and to invest additional dollars into these vital services to raise direct support professional wages to at least an average of \$20.64. This investment will help us recruit and retain the workforce needed to continue to provide our quality services.**

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 and if I can ever be of any help in this process, please let me know.**



Buffie LaBelle, Regional Director

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