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House Bill 33
Written Testimony of Keith R. Kerns, Esq.
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Interested Party
March 29, 2023

Chairman Edwards, Vice Chairman LaRae, Ranking Member Sweeney and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on behalf of the Ohio Optometric Association (OOA) which represents nearly 70% of the state's doctors of optometry. We also appreciate the opportunity recently given to the OOA to present our testimony before Chairwoman Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston and the members of the Health and Human Services Subcommittee. Because our members feel strongly about the benefits to our patients that the two issues we are presenting today would bring, the OOA felt compelled to additionally bring our testimony before the full Finance Committee.

The OOA respectfully requests support from this committee and the House on two important items. We are seeking an increase of an additional 10% in Medicaid reimbursement rates on top of the 5% currently contained in House Bill 33 (a total increase of 15%) as well as a modest investment of \$2.5 million over the biennium to expand statewide the extremely successful iSee (In-School Eye Exam) program that the legislature funded in the last budget to provide comprehensive vision care to children in Ohio's Appalachian areas through the State Treasurer's ResultsOhio program.

The OOA and its members have a long history of working to improve access to comprehensive eye care for all Ohioans. Our member optometrists have delivered thousands of free eye exams and glasses to children in need of vision correction through the iSee program operated by our charitable foundation. Additionally, we have a public-private partnership with the Ohio Department of Health through its Save Our Sight Fund in which volunteer optometrists educate 100,000 Ohio school children each year on the importance of eye health and eye safety. This program, known as Realeyes, has been in operation for over 20 years and was the recipient of the American Public Health Association Vision Care Section's award for Outstanding Scientific Project and American Optometric Association's Apollo Award, which honors persons or organizations for distinguished service to the visual welfare of the public. Finally, the OOA operates what we believe is the only optometric student loan repayment program in the country, which assists new graduates with outstanding school debt in exchange for practicing in underserved areas, providing pro bono services, volunteering in the community and other criteria.

Even with all of these successful programs, access to vision care remains a concern in our state. The most important key for improvement is a strong Medicaid program. Ohio's optometrists participate in the Medicaid program at a high rate – between 60-70% accept Medicaid patients. However, rates have not been adjusted since 2015. The OOA strongly supports Governor DeWine's proposal to increase Medicaid reimbursement, including a five percent increase for vision services, but the OOA believes more can and should be done in this very important area.

Primary eye care and vision services are paramount to assisting Medicaid recipients maintain meaningful employment and for providing pediatric recipients with the best opportunity to succeed in school. These services are especially vital to Ohio's at-risk populations. There is a strong connection between eye health and chronic health issues, including diabetes, hypertension and others. Ensuring



OHIO OPTOMETRIC ASSOCIATION

that Medicaid recipients can obtain primary vision care services through community-based providers like optometrists, is an important component in treating and managing chronic health concerns. It can also reduce the chances of patients requiring institutionalized care or visiting costlier settings like hospital emergency rooms for treatment. Additionally, increasing access to comprehensive vision care can help the state accomplish its goal to increase literacy rates.

As such, the OOA respectfully requests the Finance Committee strongly consider increasing Medicaid reimbursement further than that proposed in the as-introduced budget, up to a 15% increase. This targeted and relatively modest investment can create a healthy and productive workforce for the future. It would be the intention of our association to work collaboratively with the Department of Medicaid to use this reimbursement increase to target vision services codes aimed at children while also increasing access to services for adult Ohioans as well.

Children's vision issues require special attention. It is estimated that 25% of school-aged children have a vision problem that may impact their ability to learn. However, only 15% of children have had a comprehensive eye examination by the time they enter kindergarten. Furthermore, the school vision screenings required by Ohio state law lack the necessary test components to completely evaluate a child's visual skills. In fact, these screenings may miss 60 to 75% of children who have vision conditions such as binocular vision disorders or visual perceptual delays. The false sense of security provided by "passing" a vision screening lowers the sense of urgency for obtaining a comprehensive eye examination. Of the children who fail the school-administered vision screening, less than 30% receive necessary follow-up care. The low rate of follow-up care has been attributed to several factors including economic distress, lack of understanding about eye care, logistical barriers, inflexible work schedules, and unavailability of appointments.

Recognizing that Ohio's school districts have great diversity in geography, population, socioeconomic status, level of need, and other demographics, the OOA and its charitable foundation recently partnered with the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio and Vision To Learn to bring mobile vision care to the Appalachian region of the state. The mobile clinic is staffed by OOA member optometrists and licensed opticians and supported by the talented administrative team from Vision To Learn. This unique project was aided by the previous General Assembly with an allocation to the State Treasurer's ResultsOhio program designated for the program if it met certain pay-for-success metrics. We are pleased to report that the project not only met the designated metrics, it exceeded them, and has provided thousands of children in the region with the tools they need to achieve success in school and life. I've attached the evaluator's report from year one of the project for your review.

Even with this success, more must be done in the region and throughout the state. With the support of funding from the General Assembly, we believe that we can duplicate the results of the Appalachian project in other areas by utilizing portable vision care equipment and providing logistical and scheduling support to school nurses and local eye doctors to provide care onsite. In addition to providing comprehensive eye care and glasses the program helps establish a relationship between the child and the local eye doctor to create a pathway to a lifetime of care.

The OOA respectfully requests the Finance Committee consider an appropriation in the amount of up to \$2.5 million over the biennium for the purpose of expanding the In-School Eye Exam (iSee) program to all regions of the state.



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Should the legislature move forward with both initiatives discussed above – Medicaid reimbursement increases, and an appropriation to expand the iSee program – ***Ohio will lead the nation in properly addressing children's vision issues.***

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on House Bill 33. If you have questions or need additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at (614) 781-0708 or kkerns@ooa.org or our consulting lobbyists Dan Leite and Courtney Saunders of Capitol Advocates at (614) 224-9900.