

Ohio House of Representatives

Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services

Substitute House Bill 33

Rebekah Johnson, Parent from Lorain County

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Chair Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, my name is Rebekah Johnson, and I am a parent from Oberlin, Ohio in Lorain County.

Today, I join with fellow parents and advocates from across Ohio in thanking you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony on House Bill 33, Ohio's FY 2024-2025 budget bill, regarding the state publicly funded childcare program.

I am a mother to five wonderful and bright children ranging in age from 10 years to 5 months (Xavier (10), Xenieya (7), Xylahna (6), Xemar (4), Xoie (5 months)). My husband Mario and I live with our children in Oberlin, Ohio. Mario and baby Xoie are here with me today.

Each of my children, aside from baby Xoie, attended Oberlin Early Childhood Center through infancy and toddlerhood, with support from the state's publicly funded childcare program when our family needed help. At age 3 they transitioned to attend another Center in my town called Kendal Early Learning Center, also with the help of the state's childcare program. I am very grateful for both of these programs that have been critical for our family to grow and thrive.

The Oberlin Center is one of the very few programs that accept my voucher and care for infants. It's also where I feel most comfortable having my baby. Even though I have a childcare subsidy, I have been unable to secure care for her because the Center does not have the staffing to provide care for my baby in the infant classroom. Hiring and retaining early childhood professionals is very difficult and I know that childcare programs don't get paid enough to cover the cost of infant care.

Childcare providers are limiting how many publicly funded children they will take due to the drastically reduced rates they are paid. To serve my baby, the center would have to be willing to accept \$200-\$300 less for care every week, in addition to my not having a copay. On top of that, they are paid months after the services are provided. Our preschool provider informed me she gets paid about 1.5-2 months after she provides care to our son, Xemar. To make matters worse, they are paid for attendance and not enrollment. For example, in the K-12 system they are paid for the child all year long even if the child only attends for a month. ODJFS childcare programs are paid only on the hours the child attends on a weekly basis, even though they still require the same staffing and expenses to supply for the child whether or not they are there on any other day.

My husband makes \$17.00 per hour as a shift leader at Pizza Hut. Because our family of 7 is solely reliant on his income, we are well below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level. Every month we struggle to keep our lights on and pay the rent. If it was not for our SNAP benefits, we would not be able to provide food for our family.

I have learned a lot about the struggles of childcare providers and understand that the numbers just don't make sense, but it is difficult and hurtful to hear that my baby is not a priority because we live in poverty. Mario and I are working as hard as we can and doing our best. We just want her to have an equal opportunity to succeed in life and not be wrestling with the same vicious cycles my husband and I find ourselves in as we raise our family.

My childcare search continues. It has to. I must return to the workforce and provide for my family alongside my husband. I met with a home-based program last month and am trying to remain hopeful that I can find a trusted program to care for my baby even though, in reality, I know we have very few choices because of our income and the inadequate infant care in my community.

Despite the very real challenges of finding adequate childcare for our youngest daughter, I am still excited to begin a new career after being pushed out of the workforce during the COVID pandemic. I've recently started taking courses through the Early Childhood Resource Center of Lorain County. This course is funded by the local job and family services agency with grant funding that will support me in getting my Child Development Associate Credential so that I can be part of the early childhood education workforce that is so desperately needed. This program allows me to earn \$13 per hour to complete a 450-hour course, then apply to be hired at a childcare facility to work full time to support our family.

As you can imagine, I was elated to take this opportunity, but my excitement quickly turned to panic when my local childcare center informed me that they did not have enough staff in the infant room to take on any more babies.

If I can find childcare that allows me to successfully complete this program, I know I will still have continued challenges because early childhood professionals make so little, especially those serving publicly funded children.

Unfortunately, I recently had to put my continuing education on hold for the next few months due to childcare and continuing health complications. Every time I take one step forward, I end up ten steps behind.

It just doesn't make sense that I could get my associate degree in something that does not entrust you with a child's life and make far more money.

That is why I am committed to being a parent, a professional and an advocate—things must change. I want to be part of improving this system that is so critical for my family and so many other families that suffer and struggle alone. I can think of countless stories of family, friends and neighbors that have struggled deeply with finding access to childcare. Without more equitable access to childcare, we will all continue to suffer—our kids, families, and communities.

Thank you for listening to my story and please make our family's problems your priority by investing in our shared future through increased state investment in infant-toddler childcare capacity, preschool, the early childhood workforce and increased eligibility for childcare programs.