



TESTIMONY BEFORE OHIO HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE

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Chair Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the committee, I am Jennifer Westfall, Aging and Health Director for the Buckeye Hills Regional Council. Thank you for the opportunity to speak on House Substitute Bill 33.

Buckeye Hills Regional Council is a development district, council of government and Area Agency on Aging located in southeast Ohio serving an 8-county region. The Buckeye Hill's region includes Noble, Monroe, Athens, Washington, Perry, Hocking, Meigs and Morgan counties. These counties are some of the most beautiful in the state, rich in natural resources and home to the highest percentage of older adults per capita in Ohio, but these same counties experience economic downturns, limited community resources and poverty.

The Governor's 2024-2025 executive budget proposes increased investments that are vital to supporting older Ohioans in the community. These include increased rates for the assisted living waiver, adult day services and home-delivered meals; increased funding for PASSPORT Administrative Agencies; increases in funding for the Senior Community Services program; new Healthy Aging grants; an increase to the Alzheimer's and Dementia Respite line item; technology modernization; an increase for Adult Protective Services, and an Aging Economy Report.

We support all of these investments. Thank you for keeping them as part of the House budget.

We also want to express our gratitude for the proposed increases in the House substitute bill for direct care workers. We recognize that moving from \$10-12 an hour to \$17 and \$18 an hour is a significant investment. We assure you that it is well worth it.

At our agency, the impact of low wages, low rates and high needs is being felt every day. Just over the course of the COVID 19 pandemic, our region has lost over 10% of the home health providers within our local network. This results in many individuals experiencing unmet needs, putting their health and sometimes their life at risk.

The workforce impact extends to our staff as well. Our assessors and care managers deal with unmet needs and lack of home health aids on a daily basis as individuals wait for an aid or service delivery that cannot be delivered due to the lack of available workforce.

Within our network of Area Agencies on Aging, we are currently facing a workforce shortage that has resulted in at least 4500 people statewide enrolled in programs waiting for home care

services. In the Medicaid HCBS PASSPORT waiver program for older adults, more than 2000 individuals are waiting for personal care services alone.

Compounding the workforce and unmet needs crisis, the different rates and requirements for similar work in Medicaid waiver programs, results in competition for the small number of workers available and an imbalance in the system. As a provider, would you choose a lower paying waiver or a waiver program with the highest rate? The lack of parity within waivers creates a form of competition among a network that works best together, serving the State's residents of greatest need- older Ohioans and Ohioans with disabilities.

Over the past several months, the Area Agencies on Aging have organized home care roundtables across the state to give a voice to the providers, caregivers, direct care workers and individuals we serve.

The number one theme that emerged from the roundtable was low reimbursement rates resulting in an inability to pay a competitive wage to recruit workers and rates that allow for basic employee benefits such as sick leave, annual leave, funeral leave, and the ability to access and afford childcare - the essentials to working a livable, life sustaining job.

Providers shared that they have tried numerous retention and recruitment strategies with little success; that they lose potential caregivers to other providers, other programs and industries that pay much more; that the reimbursement rate is insufficient to cover the cost to provide vital services, and that workers are facing a benefits cliff where a small wage increase will mean they lose critical work supports.

We have heard from providers that to recruit and sustain this workforce, we need to increase wages to support staffing, benefits and retention. The increases included in the substitute bill will help move us forward. Our Association will continue to advocate for rates that ensure sustainability for the long term.

We continue to express gratitude for the proposed increases in the House substitute bill, but work still remains ahead of us to ensure a future Ohio that is a great place to age. An Ohio where we live healthy, engaged, and secure lives as we age in our homes and communities. We must ensure adequate resources are dedicated to the full spectrum of supports, especially home and community-based services, which includes home care.

We look forward to working with the current members of the General Assembly and with future Members, along with the Administration, to continue creating a State where individuals can age where they wish, in a way that they choose with a workforce paid at a rate that recognizes the importance of the work they provide.