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Sponsor Testimony for House Bill 198

Chair John, Vice Chair Dean, Ranking Member Brennan, and members of the State & Local Government Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 198.

As someone who has personally experienced the transformative power of counseling, I want to share why this profession deserves not only our awareness but also our action to support it. Like many Ohioans, we **all** face challenges in life—moments of doubt, trauma, and overwhelming uncertainty. For me, Seeking therapy was one of the most important decisions I made, and it has equipped me with the tools to navigate those difficulties, allowing me to become a better advocate, leader, and public servant to the people of this great state.

Counseling is not just a service—it's a lifeline. In Ohio, we are seeing the growing need for mental health support, particularly among our youth and rural communities. A recent study revealed that over **1.5 million adults in Ohio experience mental health challenges each year**, yet **nearly half of them do not receive treatment** due to barriers like cost, stigma, and access. We also know that the Ohio counselor-to-population ratio is one of the lowest in the Midwest, leaving many Ohioans without timely or appropriate care.

This bill aims to address two critical goals: increasing awareness of the value of counseling and ensuring we invest in the future of this profession. **Designating April as Counseling Awareness Month is a call to action.** It is an opportunity to educate the public, support counselors in their mission, and inspire a new generation to join this noble field.

For me, the journey through therapy taught me that strength is not measured by how much we carry but by our willingness to ask for help when we need it. Counselors are the guides who help us unpack our burdens, and their work directly impacts families, communities, and workplaces.

Through HB 198, we aim to honor the American Counseling Association's tradition of recognizing April as Counseling Awareness Month, but we must also pair this designation with tangible efforts to make counseling **more affordable, accessible, and sustainable for all Ohioans**. We need to address workforce shortages by providing incentives and pathways for young Ohioans to enter this profession.

Chair John, Vice Chair Dean, Ranking Member Brennan, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective on House Bill 198, and we are happy to answer any questions you may have.