

Testimony on SFY 24/25 Operating Budget

House Finance Health and Human Services Sub-Committee

Chairwoman Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and esteemed committee members,

I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Amber Scheks and I am the Delegating RN of Echoing Hills of Stark Summit County Region. We are an organization that provides health care support, continued assessment, training, and teaching of skills to promote health and independence to Individuals with intellectual disabilities and or residential, day, and employment services through the home and community based waiver program administered by the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD). Our team of employees are proud to provide essential services to many Ohioan's in need of support in varied ways throughout Stark and Summit Counties 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.

It is very difficult to meet the needs of the clients as they are trying to gain and master critical life skills in a safe way if I do not have enough staff to provide the supervision or support that the clients need to accomplish this. If we are not competitive with our wages the staff will go elsewhere especially with inflation causing cost of living to rise. My brother is a general manager over two paper plants and is facing the same staffing crisis, but has the ability, even if it is costly, to replace people with machines that will do the work. In our line of work, we are not building boxes but supporting Ohioans that are people in our community trying to live a productive and active life that are faced with disabilities that require assistance to maintain and gain Independence that you and I often take for granted. There is not a machine that can accomplish the support they need. Our current budget is not sustainable to maintain and keep staff that we need to do this critical job. We are currently paying agency staff that are driving in upwards to two hours to get to our facility to maintain safe staffing numbers to support our client's needs. This is at an inflated price that we can't sustain for the long term. That is if we can even retain agency staff as all health care is looking for these workers and they are far and few between. The wonderful staff we do have are hard to retain as they are able to get jobs with less responsibility that pay them more.

The services we provide are critical to keep the clients active in the community and not isolated because they have a disability. This gives them such a sense of value and belong as it does you or I that long for the same things. It gives them the Independence to live in a home environment and not institutionalized just because they need extra support. It gives them confidence to work in the community and be successful in a business skill with a chance to earn income and be valued as equally as their neighbors that do not face disabilities. It gives families freedom to not solely bear the burden of being the only support their loved one may have. It is hard to have a "brother" relationship if the majority of your interaction falls under "caregiver" and not sibling interactions.

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 Echoing Hills. 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. I have been with Echoing Hills for 25 years and want to see them continue to serve these amazing Individuals and watch them grow and develop. We can't do it without your support.

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.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "AScheks RN". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "A".

Amber Scheks RN

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