



BITTERSWEET

Bittersweet, Inc.

Testimony on SFY 24/25 Operating Budget
House Finance Health and Human Services Sub-Committee

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

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Dustin Watkins and I am the executive director of Bittersweet Farms, located in Lucas, Wood, and Allen Counties. We are a non-profit organization that provides residential services under the Intermediate Care Facilities for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (ICFIID) program and residential, day and employment services through the home and community-based waiver program administered by the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD). Our team of approximately one hundred and fifty employees is proud to provide essential services to nearly one hundred and fifty Ohioans with autism.

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.

Since our founding in 1983, we have shown a strong record of successfully serving individuals from across the autism spectrum, particularly those with complex behavioral challenges. This success relies upon a foundation of cultivated rapport and the keen insight and dedication that our DSPs have for the people they support. The extreme shortage and correlated demand for these distinctively skilled employees makes the mounting need for competitive wages undeniable. Like so many of our fellow service providers, we have exhausted every available effort to deliver the fullest compensation possible for our DSPs, including targeted fundraising. Despite substantial gains, we are still significantly out of balance with competing employment sectors, and therefore increasingly limited in our capacity to meet the current and future needs of our community. In the past year alone, we have sadly had to discontinue services for three long-term participants with high behavioral needs because we did not have the adequate staff to effectively support them, and have had to turn many other program applicants away for the same reason.

Bittersweet Farms is world renown for our unique and effective service model and for being the first program of its kind in the United States. For the past forty years, we have positively impacted the lives of countless individuals with autism, and those whose lives they touch. As we look ahead with the knowledge that the number of people with autism continues to grow each year, we must ensure that they have access to the services and supports they require to ensure their health, safety, and overall quality of life. Not only is providing this proactive care and support much more cost effective than the otherwise necessary reactive solutions, it is also the right thing to do for Ohioans with autism and their families.

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 Bittersweet Farms. **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.

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.



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