



INDEPENDENCE

OF PORTAGE COUNTY

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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 Michele Howell and I am the Direct Support Professional of Independence Inc and we are located in Portage, Summit and Stark counties. We are an organization that provides - intermediate care facilities for 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 150 employees are proud to provide essential services to 80 Ohioans 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 our the people we serve and their families rely.

The stability of the direct support workforce has been a long-standing issue across disability service systems. Our industry continues to be plagued with high turnover at a time when demand for additional direct support professionals to support persons with disability is rapidly growing. Action is necessary if we want to ensure that supports provided are person-centered, increase inclusion, and lead to valued lives for people with Disabilities. However, we have yet to be able to ensure sufficiently funding to support these initiatives and our legislators are the only ones that can assist in this action of securing our industry's most valuable asset – Direct Support Professionals.

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 Independence Inc. **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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