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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 submit this written testimony.

I know you are already aware that over the past several years the developmental disability (DD) provider community in Ohio has been significantly challenged by staffing and funding issues. **We are in a crisis.** Our most pressing need is for additional Medicaid funding so we can increase the hourly rate paid to Direct Service Professionals (DSPs) and other employees. We have a unique opportunity through the current state budget process to provide much-needed additional funding to the DD provider system to address the current needs. We need your help.

I have been in the DD field for nineteen (19) years. I have been employed by Hattie Larlham for seventeen (17) of those years. Currently, I serve as the Director of Employment Services. Hattie Larlham, a not-for-profit organization, is one of the largest providers of services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Ohio. We provide the full array of DD services to over 1,500 individuals at approximately seventy (70) locations in Northeast Ohio and the Franklin County area. We have over eight hundred employees.

My department supports individuals with disabilities as they obtain and retain employment. Local job markets and the greater community benefit when individuals with disabilities are active members of the workforce. With the right support and accommodations, individuals with disabilities have fulfilling careers which afford them greater independence and financial freedom.

I feel fortunate to do this work. I know personally how enriching having a career is. My team makes it possible for 400+ Ohioans with disabilities to have careers in their communities each year. The impact we make on people's lives is so substantial that I continue to show up. I continue to show up despite the ever-increasing challenges faced by the DD provider system.

We are in a crisis. We cannot hire employees simply because we cannot afford to pay a competitive wage. We cannot afford to pay a competitive wage because the funding does not support it. Hattie Larlham has done everything possible to stay afloat but the current funding does not cover the cost of doing business. I have watched countless employees reluctantly leave the field for jobs that have no meaning or value to them other than a better paycheck.

Ohioans with disabilities are suffering to the greatest extent through this crisis. Individuals are being let go from their jobs for matters out of their control like being unable to find an employee to drive them to work or to provide them with job coaching. There are so many that want to work but cannot because Ohio providers cannot meet the needs given the staffing crisis. Currently, Hattie Larlham's Employment

Services has 35 job seekers on a waiting list for services. Opportunities for Ohioans with disabilities are diminishing.

The crisis not only affects people's ability to work in their community but every aspect of their lives. Now, people with disabilities are without direct support professionals to drive them to the grocery store, accompany them to church, take them to see friends or cook them dinner. For the people with the highest needs including those that are medically fragile, unable to ambulate, self-feed or toilet independently, having less support is a matter of life or death.

The backbone of any DD provider agency is its employees. Hattie Larlham will not be able to continue to provide support and care to the individuals we currently serve unless we are able to address our staffing needs. It should be obvious that starting salaries of \$14.00 per hour to \$16.00 per hour are not enough to attract employees to the field. We need the help and assistance of the Ohio Legislature to address this staffing crisis and to provide additional funding to allow DD providers to pay employees an acceptable hourly rate.

I thank you and your colleagues, the Governor, and the leadership at DODD for your efforts and support over the past three (3) years to help us and our colleagues deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and the staffing crisis. Governor DeWine has included additional funding for DD providers in the FY 2024-2025 state budget. This increase is an important start to help Hattie Larlham and other providers address their staffing needs but is it not the full funding solution that is needed. More needs to be done.

Hattie Larlham believes starting salaries need to be at a minimum of \$20 per hour. Without additional funding, providers in Ohio will be forced to close, limit programs and services even more than what has already occurred, or significantly reduce the size of their operations. If we do not fix this funding issue now – who will?

Thank you for your support of Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We look forward to a state budget that will provide the needed funding to stabilize the DD system and allow us to meet the needs of the people we serve. They count on us every day to meet their needs – and we cannot let them down.

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