

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

I would first like to thank you Chairwoman Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and committee members for the opportunity to speak before you today.

My name is Cora Denning. I am the HR Generalist for Independence of Portage County, Inc. I am here in support of the proposed funding for House Bill 33, increasing the funding of services through DODD. For the past 50 years, Independence of Portage County has been providing services for those that are diagnosed with intellectual and developmental disabilities throughout Portage County. I have been fortunate to provide services to Ohioans diagnosed with disabilities for 13 years.

When I started at Independence, I was 16 years old. I entered the field through a county funded program aimed to help children of poverty gain resources and employment. I have maintained a variety of positions, including being a Direct Support Professional for about half of my career with Independence. Through my 13 years, I have helped improve the lives of a couple hundred people. I have been able to do this by ensuring they are receiving the proper medical attention, adequate nutrition, and an improved quality of life. In Ohio, there are approximately 2,322,715 adults with disabilities. That is about 1 in 4 Ohio adults that are diagnosed with a disability. In the United States, children born with disabilities have increased from 3.9 to 4.3 percent from 2008 to 2019, respectively. This number is anticipated to increase as more Ohioians are born with disabilities such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and Down Syndrome.

This past weekend, I was fortunate to spend 24 hours with nine people who range in levels of ability. None of the nine people I provided services to would be able to complete the simple day-to-day tasks that we take for granted. These simple tasks include showering, eating, taking medications, and using the bathroom. Of the 2,322,715 adults who are diagnosed with a disability, I was able to see nine live better lives.

The lives of these nine people, and the other 2,322,706 people, are improved by supports that our Direct Support Professionals provide. A Direct Support Professional is an underappreciated lifestyle. This profession asks that young adults, mothers, fathers, and grandparents put their lives on the line nearly every day to ensure that someone else's child, brother, sister is being taken care of. Our Direct Support Professionals are exposed to physical aggression,

bloodborne pathogens, and other hazards, daily. In Ohio, Direct Support Professional positions continue to become vacant. From 2019 to 2020, the number of Direct Support Professional vacancy rates increased about six percentage points.

In 2000, Ohio wrote into law The Bill of Rights for People with Developmental Disabilities. There are 24 rights that our staff are to know and understand to protect the lives of those that are statistically at a greater risk of being taken advantage of. These rights include having the right to an appropriate, safe, and sanitary living environment; to access to opportunities that enable people to develop their full human potential; and to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Those with developmental disabilities did not ask for the staffing shortage that we continue to see. They did not ask for their lives to be imposed upon in ways that are so detrimental that almost 2,000 people with disabilities are on a waiting list to receive services. This number will continue to increase without your support. Agencies, such as Independence of Portage County, are struggling to fulfill some of their most basic duties due to the staffing crisis.

With your support, Ohioans with disabilities can receive the proper staffing that is required to ensure that they, too, can develop their full human potential. Without your support, agencies will be shut down and the lives of thousands will be affected. Without your support, the quality of life for those with disabilities will decrease.

I thank you for your time and am happy to answer any questions you may have.