



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 giving me the opportunity to testify before you today.

Our nonprofits, Hopewell Industries, LICCO and Muskingum Starlight Industries have existed since the mid 60's, back in 2016 our Board of Directors began the process of fusing three nonprofits together creating a network, The Fuse Network in 2019, we support about 400 people with intellectual and developmental disabilities across Coshocton, Licking and Muskingum counties with a staff of 77. I have the privilege of being the CEO, my name is [Mary Thompson-Hufford](#).

I share about our merger of three non-profits across three counties that came together to share resources because the reality is that resources both financial and human resources, were scarce before the pandemic. We recognized that we had to do more, that we needed more resources.

We provide an array of services from day services within our buildings, community based day services, residential services both in peoples homes and in the community, vocational training, group employment sites and employment services where we help people get community jobs and support them at their jobs and also provide transportation through the home and community-based waiver program administered by the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD) and also Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD).

I am very supportive of the budget initiatives outlined by Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for DODD because people matter, relationships matter. In 2019, our turnover rate was 19% and I was upset that it wasn't lower. It takes quality staff to provide quality care and when there is a disruption it disrupts so much. Phil's statement "I try to not get attached to staff" breaks my heart. Phil had to trust us when we encouraged him to leave the workshop and group employment sites to take the risk of moving forward, moving into community employment. When he needed to change community jobs he depended on us. Phil and all the people in the DoDD system depend on us.

When we have consistent quality staff including quality middle managers it results in achievement of people's outcomes. People achieve the things that are important for them but also what is important to them. Jeremiah is 26. On March 28th, he will start his first community job. He is moving from one of our vocational training sites. His mom Brenda, an amazing mom, has to trust that his job coach Gary will be there on day 1 and on also on day 2 and periodically thereafter to help Jeremiah transition successfully. She has to trust that transportation really will show up and will show up on time. Trust matters.

40%, 42%, 43% that has been our turnover percentage the last three years. We are not able to provide continuity of care with turnover like this. Phil can tell us when something isn't working. Erica, Samatha and so many other people that the Fuse Network supports don't use words to say how they are feeling. An intelligent man like Phil has to reassure himself "they aren't leaving because of me". The magnitude of trauma that we are causing with a 40% turnover is unspeakable. People depend on us to help them transfer out of bed in the morning into their wheelchair, schedule and take them to doctor appoints, to give them showers and ensure that their basic needs are being met. People depend on us to help with their employment.

66, 70, 72 are the number of people that we were able to help gain competitive employment in the three years before the pandemic. Last year 32. 32 people, about half of what we accomplished in previous years. Our team is not doing less, what's happening is perhaps the next biggest opportunity for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities since the de-institutionalization of the 1970's.

Employers are giving people job opportunities. Darrian, is someone that has a dual diagnosis, an intellectual disability but also mental health needs and was attending day services several days a week. She went to Taco Bell on Maple Ave, applied for a job and began working full time. There is so much opportunity to help people move forward into competitive employment. Employers are calling us asking to partner.

The challenge is having enough staff to provide the job coaching that people need to be successful in the jobs and transportation to and from. We have two significant barriers, the wages of the people that we are coaching is often commensurate or more than what we pay our staff and businesses are hiring our coaches.

Staff are in very difficult positions, stay and support people or take a different job and financially provide for yourself and your family at a much higher level. I can write handwritten thank you notes and re gift boxes of chocolates but that doesn't keep food on the table and lights on for staff. The only way that this can be changed is to change the medicaid reimbursement rates.

I am ashamed of the business decisions that I am making. Business decisions to keep our doors open. Business decisions that are not best for people. In our system, providers can say that they are not a willing provider. The Fuse Network, honestly I, made the decision to tell the county board of developmental disabilities that on May 1, 2023 we will not be Ashley's transportation provider anymore. Ashley works five days a week. It's 22 minutes to get to her

house in the morning, we arrive between 6 & 6:30am then it's 20 minutes to her job. Ashley has had her job for six years. Ashley's family member that she lives with can't transport her and the county board is saying that they don't have another willing provider. What option is Ashley going to have but resign from her job. Ashley doesn't have the ability to drive. I'm going to meet with Ashley and her family member, look them in the eye and tell them that we are going to stop transporting Ashley. We have transported her since her first day on the job. Ashley has trusted us to consistently get her to work. We have been faithful since 2017. They will probably cry and beg me to change my mind. I know this reaction because I've seen many, many times over the past year when we have given notice to other people who need us. I am making strategic business decisions based on the cost margin of peoples' services.

In 2021, our Board of Directors approved using our preservation funds to off-set payroll expenses. As an organization we will not survive without your intervention. The Governor's proposed budget initiatives, guided by the leadership of Director Hauck, is a great foundation to reinforce and build the capacity of the Fuse Network to support lives that matter. 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 start saying "yes". Yes, we can provide your job coaching, yes we can provide transportation, yes we can take you to the grocery store and importantly to family members " Yes, we can provide quality care to your loved one. You can trust us to be there".

Thank you again, for the opportunity and privilege to share with you the importance of your investment in lives and relationships that matter.

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