



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 Michelle Madden, and I am the CEO of Independence of Portage County. We are located in Ravenna, Ohio and serve Portage, Summit and Stark counties. We are a not-for-profit business that provides a variety of essential services for people with Developmental Disabilities and have been in business for almost 50 years. We support 74 Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and as of today we employ 146 employees. I am very supportive of the budget initiatives outlined by Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for DODD. However, I am here today to encourage the Committee to increase funding for services administered by the DODD via HB33.

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 (DSP) to support persons with disabilities is rapidly growing. My team, as well as myself are working around the clock to ensure the people we support are taken care of but are growing tired and losing hope that there will be a light at the end of the tunnel. Quite frankly, a work life balance is impossible due to the required hours of care, limited workforce and upholding our commitment and responsibility to those we support. With a 40% deficiency in the DSPs, our front-line supervisors, office staff, maintenance and executive team are stepping in to provide direct support services to our people we have served for decades. This is in addition to their "regular" job duties. We have team members working 90 hours a week and giving up every holiday and weekend just to ensure basic coverage. In the past month alone, I have worked 73 hours DSP hours, our HR director has worked 48 hours DSP

hours, and our Program director has worked 81 DSP hours, all in addition to managing our day-to-day duties. During this same time, our DSPs and Frontline supervisors have worked 2,400 hours of overtime. Our workforce is weary, and I am concerned for their wellbeing and mental health.

The DSP role is complex because it is about supporting each individual in a person-centered way within their unique context. The workforce must have the knowledge, skills, and ethical compass to perform a wide array of tasks, supporting an individual's health & safety, and assisting them to be a valued and participating member of their community. To achieve this, it is important that DSPs (Direct Support Professionals) receive sufficient, high-quality training and opportunities for professional development. This includes not only things you and I take for granted everyday like cooking, cleaning, laundry, personal hygiene but includes program implementation/goals, behavior intervention strategies, education, medication administration, first aid, G/J tubes, insulin; this all fall within the scope of the job duties of our DSP's daily responsibilities. With our current funding and the impact of the high turnover, an average of 50%, that our field suffers from, this is simply impossible to obtain and sustain. We can barely support the people in our current care let alone take on new clients, especially those with significant behavioral/medical needs. In the last three months we have had 140 admission inquiries; out of these inquiries, only 1 was admitted. We are discharging the people with the most complex needs because we simply do not have the workforce to accommodate their needs safely and adequately. Last year we were forced to make some tough decisions, we had to take one of our 7 bed ICF's offline and discharged 6 individuals with complex needs simply because we did not have the staffing needed to support them. Discharging someone in our system doesn't mean that they just stop receiving services. Because of the residential nature of our services, people can lose not only the services of DSPs but also their housing. It can be disruptive and destabilizing for the people we serve and their families in the most intimate way.

Prior to becoming the CEO, I was an HR professional with over 25 years of experience; most of which is in this field. Our field has always struggled with recruitment and retention but never in my career have I seen it as dire as it is today. I would like to share some of our agency statistics:

In 2022, we offered employment to 157 candidates; 100 turned down the offer due to inadequate pay and benefits (75%); 48 accepted and as of today 27

are still employed with us. We currently have a 40% vacancy rate in staffing in both our DSP and Frontline Supervisor Roles. At least 35% of our DSPs and Frontline Supervisors are on some sort of public assistance. We call them Direct Support Professionals, but I ask you how many “professionals” do you know that make under the poverty level?

In 2005 when I received the privilege of working in this field, IOPCI had 305 employees with a 30% vacancy rate. We supported a little over 100 people with disabilities and their families. We have reduced our workforce by over 50% while only decreasing our people served by 25%.

I am truly in awe every day at what our team and others have been able to accomplish with such limitations in workforce resources, but we cannot continue to expect our teams to not be compensated for the professional and essential duties they are supplying.

Action is necessary if we want to ensure that support provided is person-centered, increases independence and inclusion, and leads to valued lives for people with disabilities. You, our legislators, are the only ones that can help. Our industry doesn't fare well in a capitalistic environment, as we do not set our rates. I operate a business just like many of you. However, as the CEO, I have the crushing burden of ensuring that our community's most vulnerable citizens are cared for. Myself and others like me simply don't have the one most valuable asset – the Direct Support Professional. Without that resource we simply cannot provide the support needed.

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

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