

Helen Forbes Fields  
YWCA of Greater Cleveland  
Testimony before House Health and Human Services Finance Subcommittee  
March 23, 2023

Chair Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and Members of the House Health and Human Services Finance Subcommittee:

For 150 years, the YWCA of Greater Cleveland has been serving women and families in Northeast Ohio. The YWCA Greater Cleveland's social service programs and initiatives are focused on homelessness and its effects. We seek to provide, protect, and empower transformational change for youth, young adults, women, and families with children who have experienced homelessness.

Our work with individuals experiencing homelessness includes operating Norma Herr Women's Center, the largest low-barrier shelter for women in Cuyahoga County; Independence Place, the first of-its-kind housing and supportive services facility in Cuyahoga County for homeless youth and young adults (ages 18-24 years); one of the founding partners of A Place 4 Me Collaborative a collaborative to end youth homelessness; and operating an Early Learning Center, the only trauma-informed preschool serving families who have experienced homelessness in the region, and likely the state - which will be the focus of my comments.

The YWCA of Greater Cleveland is seeking an earmark of \$385,000 each year for the Early Learning Center (ELC) which serves roughly 50 children and their families each year at no charge to the families. We are grateful that the program has received funding in the last three State budget cycles, and ask the General Assembly to continue this funding with an increase, to allow for enhanced services to families and inflationary adjustments. State support is vital to the program's continuity, as the children's specialized needs require more highly trained staff than traditional pre-K programs.

Families experiencing trauma need an intentional level of support for their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth in order for families to exit homelessness and achieve housing stability. The ELC preschool provides the foundation for kindergarten readiness and success together with mental health services. Of the children enrolled, 100% have experienced between 1-10 Adverse Childhood Experiences such as witnessing domestic violence, neglect, exposure to substance abuse, physical, sexual or emotional abuse, and other significant household dysfunction.

YWCA's ELC preschool is a two-generational model, serving parents and their children. All children are assessed by an early childhood mental health clinical specialist to identify their unique needs. The clinical specialist works collaboratively with the family, our four-year degreed teaching staff, and our Family Engagement Manager to build the family's self-sufficiency and success.

In addition to serving the child, the YWCA ELC employs a holistic approach to meet the needs of family and help them begin to thrive. Each year, nearly 80% of children at enrollment are living in a homeless shelter with a parent. Over the past five years, 94% of these homeless families achieved and maintained housing and family stability.

We are proud of the progress and success of the families we serve through the Early Learning Center. With your continued support we will be able to continue to provide this critical resource to some of Ohio's most vulnerable children and families, and help them on their journey toward brighter futures.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Helen Forbes Fields". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "H".

Helen Forbes Fields, Esq.  
President & CEO  
YWCA of Greater Cleveland