

Testimony from Kitty Lensman, President and CEO, CET/ThinkTV
On behalf of the Ohio Alliance for Public Telecommunications
March 15, 2023

Chairman Richardson, and members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to address this important committee. My name is Kitty Lensman, and I am here today representing the Ohio Alliance for Public Telecommunications, serving as President-Elect of the Ohio Educational Television Stations, and the President and CEO of CET in Cincinnati and ThinkTV in Dayton. The Ohio Alliance for Public Telecommunications includes the 8 Ohio Educational Television Stations, 15 Ohio Public Radio stations and 6 Ohio Radio Reading Services.

I am expressing my support today for the budget request submitted to you by the Broadcast Educational Media Commission and endorsed by the Alliance for Public Telecommunications. We endorse the state support for the Statehouse News Bureau, Ohio Government Telecommunications (OGT) and Public Media Content Development, Acquisition, and Distribution included in the overall BEMC budget.

Together, CET and ThinkTV is an Ohio Public Media organization representing Cincinnati and Dayton - 2 of the 8 Ohio PBS stations - providing educational and public services to about 3.8 million people. However, across the State, public media reaches more than 98% of Ohio households with or without cable services – that distribution is critical - especially to at-risk and rural families. Our broadcast services include children's programming, news and information, arts, culture - historical and local documentaries across multiple media platforms.

This programming is certainly appreciated by our viewers – in trust and quality- and members who voluntarily support our organizations.

Are you a viewer? Do you enjoy the Newshour, Nature or NOVA? Or does your child or grandchild watch Sesame Street? That is the core programming that we are known best for. But today I'd like to talk to you about services we provide beyond what you may watch or listen to on public television or radio. Therein lies the power of public media. These services include Education, Community Engagement and Local content development and are essential to Ohio families.

During COVID, it was public broadcasting that pivoted and rose to the occasion to help our teachers and families who were suddenly tasked with remote learning. Connectivity was an issue for rural families. Using technology was an issue for teachers.

We haven't stopped that work and discovered best practices to increase the educational work we already provided.

Each year, public media creates a wide variety of educational curriculums and resources for thousands of teachers and learners across the State. Each year we offer professional development for teachers, conduct thousands of early childhood workshops for families and, we train teachers to use technology in the classroom. We develop workforce development tools and information for underserved and at-risk families. This is not created in a vacuum, but with experts and advisors in education.

In fact, this year the Ohio public media stations embarked on the single largest educational project in our history. Titled, *Ohio Learns 360* – this turn-key education service delivers tools for afterschool care providers, teachers, caregivers and families to address the education impact of COVID on K-5 learners. Especially as it relates to reading and math loss. The concept is to continue learning after the school day. The project includes, **Camps in a Box**, **Virtual fieldtrips** across the state and **parent webinars**. We are collaborators... and this project has provided an opportunity for increased collaboration and partnerships across Ohio. Working with Boys and Girls clubs, YMCAs and the Ohio State network of afterschool providers this collaboration between Ohio's public media and the Ohio Department of Education has been recognized nationally and applauded as a project that can be replicated in other states.

Ohio is a State that is as diverse as the communities we *all* serve. Engaging with our citizens and partners in our own local communities - is a valuable resource that public media fosters. Each of our organizations convene town halls – offer safe spaces for civic engagement and dialog and invite our families into our stations for screenings and events.

Through collaboration, public media stations work to serve the State, partnering with Ohio Public Radio (OPR) and Television Statehouse News Bureau and The Ohio Channel. Our statewide connection via technology is a service that BEMC provides us all. Without public media Ohio citizens could not watch the Ohio Government sessions at no cost on their televisions.

While the vast majority of funding for public broadcasting comes from viewers and listeners like you, the operational support and funding from the State of Ohio assures that all citizens and schools have access to the same quality programs and services. It is a foundation of funding that we rely on and are able to build from each year. State support is also essential in leveraging funding at the federal and local level.

The Broadcast Educational Media Commission (BEMC) is the State of Ohio agency with responsibility for public broadcasting and distance learning. The agency is doing a tremendous job of providing both operational support for stations and providing important grant funding for OGT, the Statehouse News Bureau serving both radio and television stations and Multi-Media Educational programs. The Multi-Media funding that is part of the Content Development budget line has allowed us to create educational programming and build a comprehensive library of tools and videos for parents and students focusing on topics such as Social Emotional Learning, STEM careers, and the other workforce development issues that are so important in today's world.

Let me briefly mention our Ohio Radio Reading Services.

2.4% of the Ohio population has some kind of visual impairment. And we are fortunate to have the Ohio Radio Reading Service to support them.

The Six Ohio Radio Reading Services reach homes without internet access and provide the service free of charge to the user through partnerships with our public broadcast stations. Dependent on volunteerism and community donations, these small, not-for-profit organizations must have State support to ensure core services continue and that we have an informed and educated voters, reduce public assistance needs, and can increase employment of visually-impaired persons.

Lastly, public media stations have maintained their commitment to public safety service in creating the Ohio Emergency Alert System, supporting alerts and emergency messaging for the public, positioned to expand that service to first responders as new public notification systems evolve. This was critical in my communities last year when the Dayton tornados hit our region. Ohio remains a national leader in this field and Congress has appropriated millions of dollars to FEMA to expand these types of systems utilizing public broadcasting.

Noting all of this, the Commissioners of the BEMC asked staff and stations to develop a budget proposal that will allow the agency and affiliates to maintain their current level of services. The Commission approved that budget unanimously and we respectfully request that you do all you can to assure that the complete request by the Broadcast Educational Media Commission is included in the 2024-2025 budget for the State of Ohio.

We're asking for a relatively small increase in funding, to just over \$11 million dollars, to allow us to maintain the critical, educational and public services that our communities have come to expect and rely on.

Thank you for your past and continued support.
This concludes my testimony.

(see additional information on following pages)

Additional Information concerning Budget Request for Ohio Educational Television Stations, Ohio Public Radio Stations, and Ohio Radio Reading Services

GRF ALI		FY 23 Appropriation	FY24 & FY25 Executive Budget Recommendations (each year)	Additional Annual Request over Executive Budget (each year)	Total Annual Request for FY24 & FY25 (each year)
935410	Content Development Acquisition and Distribution	\$3,909,231	\$3,909,231	\$371,377	\$4,280,608
	Operational Support for:				
	Television and Radio Stations			\$251,775	
	Radio Reading Services			\$22,974	
	Multimedia Educational Projects			\$91,627	

As indicated above, Ohio’s public broadcasters and reading services are requesting a small increase in FY 2024-25 operating budget above the flat funding for line 935-410 recommended in the Governor’s Executive Budget. This increase is solely for the purpose of assisting us in maintaining our existing services to the public at current levels under the pressure of inflation.

The Ohio Alliance for Public Telecommunications is making the request on behalf of the Ohio Educational Television Stations, Ohio Public Radio stations and the Ohio Radio Reading Services. Together, they represent the organizations that operate more than 50 broadcast transmitters or partner with broadcasters to provide service to their local communities covering the state.

How is the money used

Roughly three-quarters of the money in this budget line provides daily operating support to the broadcasters and reading services. Money is distributed to the broadcasters based on the number of station transmitters they operate, while reading services allocations are based on the amount of local programming they provide to their special-need listeners. The budget line supports the creation and acquisition of programming as well as a variety of non-broadcast educational initiatives benefiting learners and families. Stations have added services such as the 24-hour PBS Kids channel and additional carriage of the Ohio Channel. The operational support in this budget line is distributed by BEMC based on a formula referenced in the O.R.C.

The funding also supports other types of partnerships, such as for emergency communications, with the television stations working with the Ohio EMA to carry the Ohio Emergency Alerting System data feed in their broadcast signals. We are pursuing new federal funding to support and expand this initiative in Ohio.

The balance of the budget line represents the sole source of funding for a longtime state Multimedia program that creates and distributes education and career-targeted videos projects and supporting materials that are made available for use in the classroom and on-demand for Ohio learners. Coordinated by BEMC in partnership with the Ohio Department of Education, recent projects have focused on state priorities such as STEM and college and career readiness issues supporting workforce education goals. The availability of this remote learning content is increasingly important as a portion of the educational mix.

Together, broadcasters and reading services provide a wide variety of on-air and on-line services that are used in the home and in the classroom. We promote learning at all levels, education for

tomorrow's workforce and citizenship initiatives that address the needs of Ohioans while making quality entertainment and government information available to every citizen of the state without a subscription.

Why we are requesting additional funds

As BEMC Executive Director Geoffrey Phillips noted, the success of the state's educational media systems require ongoing, coordinated investment at all levels. OGT and the Statehouse News Bureau, BEMC and the broadcasters must all be maintained and healthy to justify the support of the others.

Soaring inflation over the past two years has driven up the operating costs that are beyond our control, perhaps best demonstrated by the cost of electricity for operating our numerous transmitters. At the same time, our other sources of income from the community have still not recovered from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While each of our organizations is separately operated or licensed, they use the state's essential base support to leverage federal, corporate and community support that is an even greater part of their budgets. Much of public broadcasters' federal support is directly tied to our state and local funding, so it is essential to us for the state to maintain its support at a proportional level (after inflation) to stabilize the federal dollars. The special federal support programs under COVID have expired.

While we fell behind during the COVID-19 years, non-state funding has also not caught up in any category. Support from non-governmental sources has been very slow to return, in many cases because the pandemic changed giving habits with businesses, corporations and foundations shifted funding traditionally used to support public media to health and other programs addressing immediate COVID needs.

As organizations of all types reevaluate business models in this time of economic uncertainty, many are holding back on renewing or making new commitments. Even National Public Radio had to announce last month that it was laying off 10% of its staff because of unanticipated shortfalls in non-governmental program support.

Despite best efforts at the station level, a third-party survey also released last month reports that overall income from individual contributions is also in decline. Even more ominous are figures showing that new station memberships are down nearly ten percent. Even special events that provide significant contributions to operating budgets, such as the *VOICECorps'* annual corporate golf outings here in Columbus, are struggling to find participants. Unfortunately, every additional dollar spent to raise additional local funds is a dollar that is not available for the creation of content.

The stations and reading services believe we have demonstrated our value to the state each year, demonstrated when we were able to respond to state government and educational needs during the recent times of crisis. We believe that our request for a nominal increase in state support, less than three cents per person, reflects an effective use of funds in serving the nearly 12-million Ohioans of all ages who use our educational and cultural programming as their link to the larger world.