



WRITTEN TESTIMONY (PROPONENT) OF LEAH MERRITT
OHIO COUNCIL OF YWCAs
BEFORE THE OHIO SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
SENATOR MATT DOLAN, CHAIR
AM.SUB.H.B.33
MAY 25, 2023

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the Senate Finance Committee. I am Leah Merritt, President and CEO of YWCA Mahoning Valley and President of the Ohio Council of YWCAs. Our Council consists of 13 YWCA associations across the state that is committed to our mission of eliminating racism and empowering women.

I am here to provide proponent testimony in favor of Am.Sub.H.B. 33, which earmarks \$1.5 million per year to support specific programming which provides direct service delivery to women and children victimized by gender-based violence throughout Ohio, and to continue and expand community outreach through youth development and prevention programs. More specifically, the bill would continue to support YW programs that:

- Prevent domestic violence,
- Support victims of domestic violence,
- Provide trauma-informed services for survivors of domestic violence, and
- Support youth development and prevention programming by increasing outreach and development opportunities, especially those focused on social emotional learning and bullying prevention.

These services include emergency shelters, supportive housing, crisis hotline support, and non-residential services. YWCAs provide wraparound services that address gender-based violence, including trauma-informed support for survivors such as counseling, case management, substance abuse services, and prevention education that works to implement systemic solutions.

The Council's members each face a unique set of challenges related to providing this important work, and other members will independently submit more information about their efforts. I will note efforts of four members. YWCA Mahoning Valley uses the earmarked funds to support its transitional and permanent supportive housing for families. The profile of those served includes homeless families who may be fleeing domestic violence, lack economic resources and living with disabilities. These could include physical, mental and substance abuse conditions. Approximately 20 persons are served each month in part with this funding. Rent, utilities and basic essentials are provided. Trained and licensed staff offer case management and peer recovery support coaching to assist in stabilizing and moving families forward.

We see a rising need; these economically vulnerable persons have been challenged by rising rent costs and limited availability for quality affordable housing. Moreover, we see that the trauma of the past two years; this post-pandemic time has revealed an increase of mental health and substance abuse incidents, as well as an increase in violence. Finally, we have incurred rising costs. Since we pay for rental properties, our costs have



gone up as much as 50% in some cases to house families. Grant funds have not. Other rising costs include food, utilities and staffing.

In the YWCA Hamilton, crisis calls to its domestic violence hotline continues to exceed pre-pandemic norms of 30-45 per month. The calls for support and/or shelter remains in triple digits as an average per month. Numbers served will surge this 2023 calendar year due to the opening of the new shelter which is triple the size of the old shelter. Human trafficking survivors tend to spike in warmer months. For its youth program (FIERCE Girls and Men of Honor), the YWCA is required to track lots of demographic information, but most importantly they are working to create safe spaces for youth to learn domestic violence prevention and resilience skill building.

The YWCA Greater Cincinnati is the only DV shelter in Hamilton, Clermont, Brown and Adams Counties. In 2022 it had a 22% increase in callers to our DV Hotline, a 19% increase in survivors it had to refer due to lack of space, and the cost of shelter is increasing due to a need to build a new shelter to accommodate survivors in non-congregate settings.

YWCA Dayton has used earmarked funds for security, but those funds do not cover even a quarter of what it expends on security each year. Total calls to its Montgomery County domestic violence hotline increased for 2022 (6,625) by over 70% compared to 2021 (3,886). The number of adults and children sheltered by YWCA Dayton increased by 13% between 2021 and 2022. There is an independent need for increased funding for shelter operations in general, and when combined that with the lack of safe, affordable housing options, the organization sees longer shelter stays and uncovered bed night expenses.

Across Ohio, combined our associations reached more than 90,000 women, girls, and families last year. Our current sources of funding include federal and private entities and TANF funding provided to the Council of YWCAs so that we could meet ongoing needs of the communities and the vulnerable populations we serve. This was the first shared state funding ever received by the YWCA's.

The bill will increase our breadth, our reach, our impact. It will significantly strengthen our ability to serve more Ohioans in need, improve program quality, and increase the impact of those we serve, and it will do so at a time when need has never been greater. It will provide the state a statewide effort that understands the need for efficacy, outcomes, quality and standardization.

Each year, the demand for services increase. Across the state, YWs are community-centered, racial justice and gender equity advocates, combaters of human-trafficking and stalking, economic developers, educators and tutors, health and wellness purveyors—all while championing civil rights, human rights, family rights, children's rights, and social justice.

Our programs are curriculum-based and outcome-oriented; we sustain active service partnerships and referral channels throughout our respective communities. The requested funds would be a line-item appropriation in TANF Block Grant funding, which will not cost the state any General Revenue Funds as it is an allocation of federal pass-through dollars; yet be concrete dollars with a full community return.



The Governor's proposed budget was a great start to emphasizing the resources to be devoted to areas in social services to protect the most vulnerable Ohioans in Am.Sub.H.B.33. The House-passed version is an improvement to the bill from because it demonstrates a clear commitment to support programming in organizations such as ours that are also on the front lines to address those we serve. The bill's current funding is consistent with that priority.

Chair Dolan, we urge the Committee to favorably consider Am.Sub.H.B.33. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.