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**Testimony of Dr. Jennell Vick
Executive Director, Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center
To the Senate Finance Committee
May 25, 2023**

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer proponent testimony on House Bill 33, the state’s main operating budget. In particular, I am here to support the strategic and transformative investment in the “Services for the Deaf” line item (GRF 415508) proposed by Governor DeWine.

My name is Dr. Jennell Vick. I am the executive director of Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center. With over a century of service to the community, we are the nation’s oldest nonprofit speech, hearing, and deaf services center. Prior to stepping in to this role in 2015, I was a professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences at Case Western Reserve University, in the Communication Sciences program. I have been a research scientist at institutions that include the University of Washington in Seattle, the University of Texas at Dallas, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The majority of my research career was spent studying communication in adults who were profoundly deaf. Among my close collaborators was Dr. Harlan Lane, the world's foremost scholar of and advocate for the deaf community and recipient of the MacArthur Genius Award for his work with the Deaf. Today, I work shoulder to shoulder with deaf professionals who seek to improve the lives of members of the deaf community.

At Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center, we are the proud home of one of the eight Community Centers for the Deaf across the State of Ohio. Today, I testify on behalf of not only my agency, our team, our board of directors and the nearly 12,000 individuals we serve every year, but on behalf of the leaders and teams at the other seven Community Centers for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing across the great State of Ohio. Together, we serve individuals and families who know, first hand, the challenges of achieving your potential in this state if you are deaf or hard of hearing. It seems challenges are around every corner for these children and adults—from developing language skills in infancy and toddler years, through the years of primary and secondary education, all the way to living independently and joining the workforce. Our Community Centers for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing are funded by the state, although the level of funding has, historically, been insufficient to even begin to meet the needs of the communities we serve. Your support of this increased line item will make a transformative investment in the many ways these individuals stand to contribute to our communities, our economy, and, most importantly, to their families and other loved ones.

My goal today is to help you understand the three main challenges that our deaf and hard of hearing community face and how increased financial support will enable our Community Centers for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing to begin to transform conditions for our community, allowing more of our deaf and hard of hearing children and adults to achieve their potential and build a stronger, more talented workforce in the State of Ohio.

Affiliations:

Case Western Reserve University
United Way of Greater Cleveland

Accreditations

CARF
Certified Medicare & Medicaid Provider
National Association of Speech and Hearing Centers
Registry of interpreters for the Deaf

The challenges that increasing this line item will help us address head-on include the following:

1. A shortage of competent, skilled American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters
2. Insufficient service availability at Community Centers for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (CCDs) to meet the growing needs of the deaf and hard of hearing communities
3. A lack of a pipeline of future deaf professional leaders

Shortage of Skilled ASL Interpreters

My colleague, Timothy Skaggs, director of the Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing at my agency, provided compelling testimony about the breadth of services that our statewide CCDs provide and about some of the challenges that deaf professionals face in Ohio. Briefly, many children who are born with permanent hearing loss lack access to early language stimulation and development. This deprivation creates many downstream impacts, including low literacy, poor academic and vocational outcomes, and a higher susceptibility to disorders of mental health and addiction. Increased funding for services for the deaf will increase access to competent, skilled American Sign Language interpreters and will improve access to services for our deaf and hard of hearing community. Let me explain more.

The most accessible language for a person who is deaf is a visual signed language. American Sign Language is a rich language that is unique to our country. It is not a signed version of the spoken English that I'm using today. In fact, it most closely mirrors French in the word order and syntax that it uses. It often surprises people to learn that American Sign Language and British Sign Language are quite different, in fact!

Sign language interpreting, then, is a complex process allowing hearing and deaf people to communicate. The interpreter listens to the spoken English and produces a signed interpretation of this message while listening to the next ideas spoken. The interpreter also must watch and understand the signed message from the deaf conversant, generating a voiced English version of the message. This profession is one that requires incredible skill, language knowledge, cognitive ability, and professionalism. It takes years, if not decades, to develop true competency.

We have a critical shortage of ASL interpreters in Ohio. This is one of the most fundamental barriers to independence, academic, and vocational success for deaf and hard of hearing children and adults in our state. Ohio is one of only three states in the country that does not require licensure or certification for its sign language interpreters. This means that interpreters of every level, even low-level, are providing services for our deaf neighbors. For deaf children, this can limit the language and knowledge they acquire in school. For a deaf professional, this can impair how they are perceived in corporate environments. Imagine, for you as a highly accomplished public servant, if you were assigned an interpreter who was not skilled at a level that matched you. What would be the result? It is possible that your intended message would not be communicated. Even worse, you may be perceived as incompetent or uneducated.

With increased funding as proposed, our CCDs will improve access to highly competent American Sign Language interpreters across the state. We will mentor pre-certified ASL interpreters to enhance their skill level to achieve a set of CCD-established quality standards and national

certification. This, in turn, will create an environment state-wide with fewer barriers to independence and employment. How? It will start at the earliest ages, when children will have greater access to education and language, improving literacy outcomes. It will enhance accommodation for deaf professionals in pre-employment and employment settings. As the language skills of our deaf community increase, it will enable more deaf citizens to enter the workforce.

Limited Services at Community Centers for the Deaf

Another area that will be improved with increased funding for deaf services is increased access to CCD services for deaf people, allowing us to serve more deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals statewide through our vocational rehabilitation programs and pre-employment transition services. Serving more deaf and hard-of-hearing people with these programs means more Ohioans emerging from the Ohio Benefits program, more Ohioans supporting industry through the workforce, and more Ohioans achieving their potential. First, though, we have to provide improved access to basic services, including case management, advocacy, information and referral, an training on independent living skills. grade), nonexistent health equity (it's not uncommon for a deaf client to show up at our doorstep with diabetes supplies and no idea what to do with them or why), and a likely history of trauma from domestic or sexual violence (our work indicates over 80% of our deaf community is affected)."

At the current level of funding, \$27,580, our ability to provide full-time services at the CCDs is quite limited. We fundraise to make up the difference but, largely, we operate our CCDs at a major loss to our overall agencies. Sustained availability of services is precarious, at best. Services, like case management, independent living skills training, advocacy, and referral are key to helping deaf and hard of hearing citizens work toward achieving independence. Without these basic services, there is no progress toward entering the pre-employment or vocational services programs. Increasing funding for services for the deaf will ensure expanded and sustained services for the deaf and hard of hearing community.

Shortage of Experienced Deaf Professionals to Lead and Mentor

Finally, increasing funding for services for the deaf will allow our CCDs to enhance professional development for future deaf professional leaders. Deaf and hard of hearing children and adults often have few role models or mentors from the deaf world. Support services provided by other deaf or hard of hearing professionals ensures that services are culturally and linguistically appropriate for clients, which is key for accommodating the needs of deaf clients and removes communication barriers. It also provides deaf clients with a peer role model in a professional role to positively influence professional aspirations. This will be key to fostering not just career entry for deaf adults, but long careers with promotions along a career ladder. With limited work experiences, it is difficult for us to find deaf leaders and mentors. Increased state funding will allow us to empower deaf professionals to lead long, upwardly mobile careers. These leaders will mentor and inspire those just entering pre-employment and vocational programs. Without a doubt, Ohio Community Centers for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing should set the standard for employing deaf professionals. This includes providing every accommodation necessary for deaf professionals to succeed. This will attract more deaf clients, ensure that services are provided with the greatest efficiency, and will

create a peer-based role modeling environment to develop the next generation of deaf leaders in Ohio.

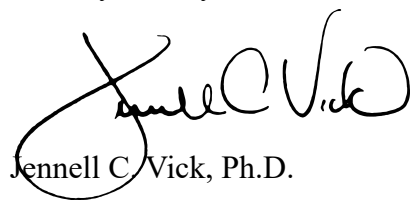
Summary

If you scrutinize the requested budget increase, you'll see it's quite high. OOD requested an over 1,800% increase in annual funding for services for the deaf, from \$27,580 to \$527,000. This is a dramatic increase, I agree, but it is nothing short of imperative. The future of our state, our economy, our workforce relies on recognizing the unique and valuable contributions that diverse populations have to offer. Our deaf and hard of hearing communities are no exception. When you consider the challenge of expanding Ohio's workforce and better serving the needs of the employers who call Ohio home, our deaf and hard of hearing community offers untapped potential.

By increasing funding for services for the deaf, you have the opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of thousands of Ohioans. You can help to break down barriers, promote inclusion and diversity, and ensure that all members of our community have the support and resources they need to thrive.

I urge you to consider these issues carefully as you make decisions about the upcoming budget, and to support the increased funding for services for the deaf. Your support will have a profound impact on our community, and will help to ensure that we can all participate fully in the rich and diverse culture of Ohio.

Thank you for your consideration. I'm happy to take your questions.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jennell C. Vick". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning and end.

Jennell C. Vick, Ph.D.