



Advocates for Ohio's Future

Testimony to the Ohio Senate Finance Committee
Sub HB 33, Main Operating Budget FY2024-FY2025
May 25, 2023

Chairman Dolan, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, my name is Kelsey Bergfeld and I am the Director of Advocates for Ohio's Future. Advocates for Ohio's Future (AOF) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of over 500 state and local health and human services policy, advocacy and provider organizations that strive to strengthen families and communities through public funding for health, human services, and early care & education. We work to empower and support nonprofit organizations and the health and human services workforce in the critical work they do, especially as it relates to lifting up and caring for all Ohioans. A full list of AOF Steering Committee members is included at the end of my testimony and also available at www.advocatesforohio.org. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on Substitute House Bill 33.

As a coalition of a broad range of health and human service organizations, we unite to identify and prioritize the greatest needs of people and families across the state. We couldn't agree more with Governor DeWine's goal of making Ohio the best state to live, work and raise a family. We support public programs that provide economic security, help people get to work, support a strong recovery, and empower Ohio residents.

The budget bill as passed by the House before you today includes policies and investments that will help move Ohio towards that goal. Particularly, we are encouraged to see an increase in funding for nutrition support, increased eligibility for publicly funded childcare, and an investment in A HAND UP Act-a benefits bridge pilot program.

Though we'd like to think the challenges of the public health and economic crises are far behind us, the impacts are still being felt across our state. Today, hundreds of thousands of children, adults, and families struggle to afford food, rent, utilities, and other basic necessities. Currently, Ohio's hunger relief network provides take-home groceries, meals, and personal care items to 1 million Ohioans each month, 1 in 4 Ohio renter households spend more than half their income on rent and utilities, and nearly 17 percent of Ohio's children live in poverty. Growing up hungry or in an unstable family situation have been identified as adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, by the CDC and Kaiser Permanente that can have lasting, negative effects on health, well-being, as well as life opportunities such as education and job potential.

AOF is also concerned that thousands of Ohioans who are already struggling to make ends meet will lose resources to keep food on the table and lose healthcare coverage as COVID era flexibilities and enhanced supports unwind. We are thankful for past investments made by the previous general assembly to help

support basic needs like food and housing, while also supporting our county jobs and family services agencies who connect people to the help and supports they need to get back on their feet.

Our coalition asks for your consideration of the following amendments that would continue strengthen families and help all Ohioans reach their fullest potential:

- We are grateful for the additional funding provided to the Ohio Association of Foodbanks by the House, However, with the end of SNAP emergency allotments in March, all SNAP recipients saw an immediate loss of at least \$90 per person, per month in fully federally-funded food assistance benefits. Ohio's network of foodbanks cannot support the increased demand following this loss without additional investment. We respectfully request an additional \$10.45 million per year to help the Ohio Association of Foodbanks meet the increased need at food banks and pantries across the state.
- \$2.5 million per year for in-person health insurance enrollment assisters, who will continue to provide free help to Ohioans navigating the Medicaid eligibility renewal process over the next 12 months of unwinding and to assist in connecting former Medicaid members to the federal Marketplace for health coverage.
- \$21 million per year to provide a \$50 per month state-supplemented minimum SNAP benefit to all Ohioans age 60 and up. With the end of SNAP Emergency Allotments, older adult households suffered a loss of \$250 per month in federally funded assistance, or more. Approximately 70,000 of these older adults returned to the SNAP minimum benefit of just \$23 per month. A state SNAP supplement would go a long way to ensure Ohio's older adults don't have to solely rely on the charitable food network to eat.
- The creation of a dedicated SNAP Employment & Training line-item and an investment of \$10 million per year to support county Job and Family Services offices in helping unemployed and under-employed SNAP recipients find and retain employment. This investment will draw down a federal 50/50 match.
- The restoration of the Employment Incentive Program for Critical Jobs line item at \$5 million per year in flexible funding to counties to help address the benefit cliff and fill gaps between programs, such as helping with health insurance costs if an individual is no longer eligible for Medicaid, or assisting with informal child care arrangements before or after school.
- Continue to invest in Ohio's future by increasing eligibility for publicly funded child care to 200% of the federal poverty level and restore the as-introduced \$150 million in American Rescue Plan Act State Fiscal Recovery funds for child care scholarships for critical occupations.
- Restore cuts made by the House to the lead abatement fund at the Ohio Department of Health (line item 440527) to \$10.8 million in FY24 and \$11.7 million in FY25 to support lead prevention programs that provide grants to local communities, ensure lead safe work protocols during renovations and repairs, and provide education and resources for parents.

Any discussion of supporting the health and recovery of Ohioans cannot be complete without addressing the direct care workforce crisis faced by every sector of the home and community-based services spectrum. Different rates and requirements for similar work result in competition for a small number of workers and an imbalance in the system. Although we were encouraged to see an increase in the hourly wage for direct care workers up to \$17 per hour in FY24 and \$18 in FY25, AOF supports our member organizations, disabled Ohioans, and older adults in respectfully requesting an increase up to a minimum wage of \$20 per hour for all direct care workers across the Departments of Aging, Medicaid, and Developmental Disabilities. Direct

care work has been undervalued and under compensated for so long that our care systems are hitting a breaking point. Unless Ohio recognizes and rewards direct care workers for the valuable work they provide in communities across Ohio, our care systems will continue to see high turnover, high vacancy rates, long wait lists, and more agency closures.

Equity should be an explicit consideration in constructing the budget. Laws and policies have institutionalized racism and bias against marginalized groups. Ohio should allocate resources and services to at-risk populations to ensure an individual's well-being and success are not predictable by race, class, geography, language, gender, or other relevant social factors. Governor Mike DeWine formed the COVID-19 Minority Health Strike Force on April 20, 2020, in response to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minorities in Ohio. The strike force contracted with the Health Policy Institute of Ohio (HPIO) to develop the "COVID-19 Ohio Minority Health Strike Force Blueprint" which contains actionable recommendations to improve health outcomes and overall well-being for communities of color in Ohio. We recommend that this committee and the full general assembly consider these recommendations and commit to promoting equity and better health outcomes for all Ohioans.

This budget is an opportunity to invest in improving the quality of life of all Ohioans. AOF and our partner organizations support policies that build an Ohio where all people and families live healthy lives in quality communities with pathways to prosperity for all.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.



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