



**Bittersweet, Inc.**

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**Testimony on HB 33  
Senate Finance Committee**

**Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and esteemed committee members,**

**Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.**

**My name is Dustin Watkins, and I am the executive director of Bittersweet Farms, a non-profit organization located in Lucas, Wood, and Allen Counties. We specialize in serving individuals with autism, offering residential services through the Intermediate Care Facilities for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (ICFIID) program, as well as residential, day, and employment services through the home and community-based (HCBS) waiver program administered by the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD). Our team of approximately one hundred employees provide essential services to nearly one hundred and fifty Ohioans with autism.**

**I want to express my wholehearted support for the budget initiatives proposed by Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for DODD. These initiatives address the critical challenges we face due to the changing labor landscape and the shortage of workers, most significantly among direct support professionals (DSPs), which directly compromises our ability to provide the necessary services for individuals and their families. The House-passed version of HB 33 is an excellent foundation to help our system combat these challenges.**

**Bittersweet Farms has a strong record of successfully serving individuals across the autism spectrum, particularly those with complex behavioral challenges. Our success relies upon a foundation of fostered rapport and the ensuing insight that our DSPs gain with and for those we serve, and the unique skillset they must possess to be effective. The extreme shortage and correlated demand for DSPs makes the urgent need for maintaining competitive wages critical. Despite our best efforts, including targeted fundraising, we continue to face significant wage disparities compared to other competing employment sectors.**

**Bittersweet Farms maintains a positive reputation as a world-renowned organization, being the first program of its kind in the United States. Over the past forty years, we have positively impacted the lives of countless individuals with autism, and those whose lives they touch. As we witness the steady increase in the number of individuals diagnosed with autism each year, it is crucial to ensure they have access to the services and supports that safeguard their health, safety, and overall quality of life.**

**The budget initiatives proposed by Governor DeWine and guided by Director Hauck serve as a solid foundation for reinforcing and rebuilding the services provided by Bittersweet Farms and our fellow providers across the state. I urge this subcommittee to approve the Governor's budget proposal for DODD and to allocate additional funding to the House-passed budget towards these vital services.**

**With your leadership, together we can ensure that these essential services remain accessible to the individuals**

in Ohio who rely on them. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my concerns with you today and thank you for your time and consideration.



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