

Helen Forbes Fields  
YWCA of Greater Cleveland  
Testimony before Senate Finance Subcommittee  
May 25, 2023

Good Morning Chair Dolan, Ranking Member Sykes, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee. My name is Helen Forbes Fields. I am the President and CEO of the YWCA of Greater Cleveland. For 150 years, the YWCA of Greater Cleveland has been serving women and families in Northeast Ohio. The YWCA Greater Cleveland social service programs and initiatives are focused on one area—homelessness. We seek to provide, protect and empower transformational change for homeless youth, and young adults, homeless women and homeless families with children ages three to five.

Our work with individuals experiencing homelessness includes operating the largest low-barrier shelter for women in Cuyahoga County, the first of its kind housing and supportive services facility in Cuyahoga County for homeless youth and young adults, providing leadership to a collaborative to end youth homelessness, and operating the only the only trauma-informed preschool for homeless families in the region, if not the state, which will be the focus of my comments this morning.

The YWCA of Greater Cleveland is seeking an earmark of \$250,000 each year of TANF funding for the Early Learning Center (ELC) which serves roughly 50 children and their families each year at no charge to the families. We are grateful that the program has received funding the last three State budget cycles, which is leveraged to secure significant private and local funding and ask the General Assembly to continue this investment with a modest increase, to allow for inflationary adjustments. State support is vital to the program's continuity, as the children's specialized needs require more highly trained staff than traditional pre-K programs, paired with wrap-around supports that stabilize the entire family.

Families experiencing trauma need an intentional level of support for their social, emotional, physical and cognitive growth in order to end family homelessness. The YWCA ELC preschool is a two-generational model, serving parents and their children. All children are assessed by an early childhood mental health consultant to identify their unique needs. The consultant works collaboratively with our four-year degreed teaching staff and family engagement case managers to collaborate toward the family's self-sufficiency and success.

The ELC preschool provides the foundation for kindergarten readiness and success together with mental health services. Of the children enrolled, 100% have experienced between 1-10 Adverse Childhood Experiences such as witnessing domestic violence, neglect, exposure to substance abuse, physical, sexual or emotional abuse, and other significant household dysfunction.

In addition to serving the child, the YWCA ELC employs a holistic approach to meet the needs of families and help them begin to thrive. The program staff work with the whole family to build skills and resiliency, so that a subsequent challenge or stressor does not cause a spiral back into homelessness, but allows the family to rebound, reach stability and ultimately thrive. Each year, nearly 80% of children at enrollment are living in a homeless shelter with a parent. Over the past five years, 94% of homeless families achieved and maintained housing and family stability.

We are proud of the progress and success of the families we serve through the Early Learning Center. With your continued support, we will be able to continue serving some of Ohio's most vulnerable children and families and help them on their journey toward brighter futures.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for your consideration of this request.