



CREATING PATHWAYS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES TO ENGAGE IN THE COMMUNITY, ACHIEVE GREATER INDEPENDENCE, AND ATTAIN EMPLOYMENT.

Testimony on SFY 24/25 Operating Budget  
Finance Committee

Chairman Dolan, Vice Cahir Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and fellow esteemed committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Laura Lamb and I proudly serve as the Chief Operating Officer of Vocational Guidance Services (VGS.) We are headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio and provide programming and services across the state, including Ashland, Delaware, Erie, Hamilton, Huron, Lake, Lucas, Lorain Franklin, Mahoning, Stark and Summit counties. VGS provides a wide range of programming that meets the needs of individuals with varying severity of a wide range of cognitive, developmental, and physical disabilities. VGS provides day and employment services through the home and community-based waiver program administered by the Department of Developmental Disabilities. Our team of thirty-five (35) Direct Service Professionals (DSP's) proudly provide essential services to over two hundred (200) Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities every day.

I am supportive of the budget initiatives outlined by Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for DODD and very appreciative of the additional investments adopted by the House of Representatives and House Bill 33.

VGS creates pathways for individuals with disabilities to *engage in their community, to achieve greater independence and attain employment.* We encourage and teach individuals to advocate for themselves. We ensure they have opportunities to build friendships, explore new interests and to be included in the larger community. We provide safe locations for our individuals that bring peace of mind for their families, guardians and loved ones. The VGS team customizes programming to provide individuals with the skills and training they need to reach their goals. And we provide connections to meaningful employment and financial independence. All of our work aims to work with individuals with disabilities to live their fullest lives.

Investments in these services provide individuals and their families with critical and lifechanging supports. I'd like to share a story about Daniel. Daniel is a 33-year-old male who lives with his mom and dad and attends our day program. Daniel has autism and a seizure disorder. Every day his parents are able to go to work because Daniel attends our services.



VGS IS AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY EMPLOYER AND SERVICE PROVIDER.

Our staff provide daily services and support for Daniel, including assisting with personal care, hygiene, and meals; administering medication; and helping him build his social and work skills. Our staff provide emotional and personal support – they listen to Daniel when he shares his emotions, frustrations, and his accomplishments. Daniel's parents have expressed their gratitude for the care VGS provides for him and that he has a safe and encouraging environment that allows them to go to work and provide for their family. receives so they can focus on their employment. Staff consistency is critical to Daniel. Adminstrating medications, monitoring his seizures, and providing medical attention as needed is a must for Daniel's care and that care is best provided by staff who are knowledgeable about individuals with disabilities, familiar with his needs, and who have a relationship with Daniel. Our staff truly provide critical life care for the individuals we serve. There is no room for error when providing care for individuals who have medical situations that can be life or death scenarios. The staff responsible for providing critical care are paid only \$14 per hour.

In Ohio and across the United States, businesses are short staffed, with only half of most restaurants seating guests because of staffing shortages and there's still supply chain issues and challenges with getting products to customers. VGS, and other developmental disability service providers across the state have been severely impacted by the staffing challenges that arose across sectors post-pandemic. VGS currently has a wait list of individuals who need experienced care, including nursing care. Many individuals remain isolated at home due to these staffing challenges. VGS wants to and has the physical capacity to provide these services, but we don't have the staff to do so.

We do not have the option to close if staff don't show up or leave without notice. Without our services, there are extreme consequences for our individuals, their families, and our community.

Without our support and services:

- Individuals with disabilities will not have access to care beyond their families.
- Families will be forced to choose their own employment or the care of their loved one.
- Families will need to seek and pay for other, more expensive social services.
- Local communities are deprived of the labor and talents of otherwise willing and able working people.

On average, VGS has a 20% show rate for every scheduled interview. Once interviewed, and if offered a position, potential candidates name the pay rate as the number one reason for not accepting the position. At \$16 per hour, we are losing staff to a local ice cream shop that hires new employees at that same incoming rate. We do not have the option to increase our rates to meet the wage demands of candidates applying without an increase in reimbursement rates from the state.

Pre-pandemic, VGS had three times the number of individuals receiving our services and we were growing. Post-pandemic has drastically slowed our growth due to the payrates that candidates are seeking. From a business point of view, the current reimbursement rate for wages is simply not sustainable – the increase in the state budget is necessary and critical.

The Governor's proposed budget is a great foundation to rebuild the services provided by agencies like Vocational Guidance Services. We encourage this committee to invest additional dollars into these crucial services to raise direct support professional wages to at least \$20.64. This investment will help us recruit, train, and retain the workforce needed to continue to provide our quality services.

With this leadership, I'm confident that together we can ensure our fellow Ohioans receive the quality services they deserve. Thank you again for the opportunity to raise my concerns and voice my dedication before you today on this critical topic. If I can be of any assistance or answer additional questions, please let me know.

*Attached is an additional story about the employment impact of VGS' services:*

Abby is a 20-year-old girl with Autism. Abby successfully graduated from public high school, with the supports provided to school age individuals with disabilities through the state of Ohio. As she approached graduation, her mother, Adriane, began searching for opportunities that would allow Abby gain independence and learn new skills once she was out of school. Safety for Abby was her biggest concern, she was also concerned about finding a place for Abby that would provide her with challenging work while supporting her needs appropriately. Abby is now employed at a local business with a small group of co-workers who also have disabilities. A VGS direct support professional (DSP) is her assigned job coach. Because of her DSP's knowledge about caring for individuals with disabilities, she can provide appropriate supports, identify needs, and advocate for Abby in her place of work. Abby's DSP makes sure that the work her employer assigns her is appropriate for her skill set and provides the opportunity to build her skills. Adriane feels comfortable with Abby going to work every day because there is a skilled, experienced, and knowledgeable staff member dedicated to Abby's success and safety. Providing capable, but vulnerable and higher-needs individuals with the opportunity to be supported in the workforce is essential to our communities. We have DSPs to thank for the continued safety and success of Abby and thousands of Ohioans with disabilities.



Laura Lamb

Office: 216.881.6033

Mobile: 216.571.4242

Email: [lauralamb@vgsjob.org](mailto:lauralamb@vgsjob.org)

2239 E. 55th Street

Cleveland, OH 44103