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Testimony Senate Finance Committee

Thursday, June 8th, 2023

Chairman Dolan, Ranking Member Sykes and Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

My name is Kerri Shaw and I serve as the Community Health Worker Lead for the OHIO Alliance for Population Health, a community-facing department of Ohio University and collaborative focused on improving the health of all Ohioans. We work collectively to combine the resources and expertise of administrators, healthcare practitioners, academic researchers, and policy experts from Ohio University and more than 50 affiliated universities, hospital associations, and healthcare providers to solve the most complex and pressing population health concerns across the state. On behalf of Ohio University, the OHIO Alliance for Population Health, and community health workers (CHWs) employed in Appalachian Ohio and around the state, I respectfully request that the Center for Community Health Worker Excellence and its appropriation be restored in Am. Sub. HB 33. This provision created a public-private partnership Board of Directors, including CHWs, and funding to strengthen and advance the CHW workforce in the state of Ohio, which has grown significantly over the last several years, and appropriated \$5 million each year of the biennium to build out a workforce infrastructure.

Community health workers are frontline health workers who come from the community that they serve and work in a local health care system to bridge gaps in service, improve access to healthcare, and serve as health advocates to underserved populations. They bring their own lived experience in poverty, recovery, homelessness, and chronic health conditions to the work they do. CHWs offer culturally appropriate health education and information, help people get the care that they need, and provide guidance on health behaviors. During the pandemic, CHWs were deployed as critical members of the COVID response teams, conducting contact tracing, providing health education and outreach, and offering health literacy to hard-to-reach populations.

The value of community health workers has been recognized and, through supportive infrastructure and the implementation of sustainability measures like Pathways Hubs, CHWs can be a low-cost, high-return investment to the health of Ohioans. Their work increases healthcare efficiency, decreases acute admissions and emergency visits, and reduces overall medical costs for patients. In places like rural Appalachia, where health inequities are severe, CHWs bridge the gap by addressing social determinants of health such as transportation and poverty by linking their community to resources.

In Appalachian Ohio and around the state, the workforce demand for CHWs has skyrocketed in recent years, just as the U.S. Department of Labor had forecasted. What is it that makes Community Health Workers stand out in the field of health professions? *CHWs can obtain a good-paying job with a high school education and CHW training.* Ohio University has trained hundreds of CHWs since launching its Board of Nursing training program in 2017; 39% of those trained held a high school diploma or a General Education Development Diploma (GED), 90% were women, and 75% were parents. The majority of them (67%) identify as Appalachian. This data indicates that we are successfully training participants from the region



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whose job prospects may be limited in rural Appalachia. They are committed to behavioral health work, serving rural communities, and working in medically underserved communities. One training participant, when asked about how their lived experience builds understanding as a CHW, responded: *"I have lived in the Appalachian region all my life, but sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like if I was not born and raised in Appalachia. I enjoy helping people in the Appalachian Community, and I have the knowledge to help them with resources because I have needed help in the past."*

Just ten years ago, CHWs were nearly unheard of in Ohio. Now, they can be found in primary care clinics, health departments, libraries, schools, OB/GYN offices, behavioral health facilities, community action agencies, and a variety of other community settings. This fast growth has surpassed current policy, though, and the workforce needs a more supportive infrastructure than is currently available. While the Board of Nursing, Ohio Department of Health, and the Office on Minority Health provide services and support, the last workforce assessment was in (a pre-pandemic) 2018 and is severely outdated. Supervisor training and continuing education offerings are insufficient in meeting the needs around the state and no one entity has been approved for CHW-specific CE requirements. Technology resources exist but are not fully utilized to adequately capture and translate the work CHWs do to support permanent, sustainable positions in the healthcare workforce. Gaps such as these would be ameliorated through the Center for CHW Excellence, where CHWs and experts would collaborate to build a unified "home" for the profession, provide an informed vision for community health work in the state of Ohio, and establish the state as a forerunner in its commitment to the health and wellness of its population.

I'd like to thank all Ohio House of Representatives members, and especially our bi-partisan champions, Finance Chairman Jay Edwards (R, Nelsonville) and Representative Darnell Brewer (D, Cleveland), for including language creating the Center for Community Health Worker (CHW) Excellence in Am. Sub. HB 33. This language is supported by Ohio University, the OHIO Alliance for Population Health, Health Impact Ohio's Board of Directors, the Ohio Network of HUBs, the Ohio Community Health Workers Association, and many others across the state.

The Center for CHW Excellence is an opportunity to strengthen Ohio's communities from within. It brings together state agencies, CHWs, private and public entities, and community-based organizations in order to lift up this workforce that is passionate about what they do – make Ohioans from all backgrounds and locales healthier. Please restore the Center for Community Health Worker Excellence.

Thank you for your time today and I am happy to answer any questions.

Kerri A. Shaw

CHW Program Lead

OHIO Alliance for Population Health

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