



Testimony to the Senate Health Committee
Nancy Mendez, President and CEO, Starting Point
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Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, and Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Senate Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Nancy Mendez, and I am the President and CEO of Starting Point.

Starting Point is a non-profit organization that prepares children and youth for a lifetime of success by building the capacity of professionals to provide high-quality care and education and connecting families to those services. We serve families and child care, pre-school, and out-of-school time programs in Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Lake, and Geauga counties.

It is clear that child care and a strong local workforce are interrelated. For parents to participate in the workforce, child care must be accessible and affordable. To build a strong workforce for the future, high-quality child care and early education are critically important.

Additional investments are needed in child care to support our workforce today and our workforce for tomorrow. Ohio continues to experience a child care crisis in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, even as employers struggle to find adequate staffing. In December 2022, Starting Point's *Child Care Workforce Survey* showed an estimated 2,500 vacant child care positions in programs in Northeast Ohio. This represents a 20% reduction in the workforce. This reduction in the workforce translates to classroom closures and waiting lists, meaning that families struggle to find accessible care.

We urge you to restore funding that will further support workforce development and education for young children. Specifically, **we request the restoration of the \$150 million of funding to support childcare scholarships for workers in critical occupations as proposed in the Governor's budget.** This funding will support workforce development by creating scholarship funds for individuals in critical roles – including child care professionals – that make an income less than 200% of the federal poverty level and below. These funds would also support the creation of new child care seats for infants and toddlers.

We also ask that you **restore the \$10 million investment in Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation that was included in the Governor's budget.** The isolation and stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have had a lasting impact on young children. Starting Point offers specialized services for young children with social-emotional and behavioral challenges. Every day, child care programs are calling us to ask for support in educating children who have challenging behaviors. The lack of resources for these children is causing burnout in early childhood educators, and even causing some of them to leave the field. Unfortunately, child care and pre-school expulsions are on the rise, and parents report not being able to find child care that can meet their child's unique needs. Investments in Early Childhood Mental Health will support badly needed treatment for these young children.

We urge this committee to recognize that child care has been underfunded and undervalued and to make the needed investments to support working families in Ohio. I am happy to answer any questions. Thank you for your time and attention.