



May 10, 2023

Testimony on SFY 24/25 Operating Budget Senate Health Committee

Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Antonio, and esteemed committee members:

I want to thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony today.

My name is Paul J. Soprano, and I am the Director of OakLeaf Services at United Cerebral Palsy Association (UCP) of Greater Cleveland. We are headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio, and serve individuals with all types of disabilities, primarily in Cuyahoga, Lorain, and Medina Counties. We are a 73 year old not-for-profit business that provides support for about 325 adults and 825 children with intellectual, developmental, and other types of disabilities annually. Our team of 175 employees are proud to provide essential services to Ohioans with disabilities.

I lead the largest division of UCP of Greater Cleveland, OakLeaf Services for adults. We serve people in two residential facilities as well as in day and employment services funded through the home and community-based waiver program administered by the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD).

We also are a long-term and trusted partner of **Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD)** offering vocational rehabilitation (VR) services to over 200 Ohioans with disabilities last year leading to community employment and greater financial independence, community inclusion, and self-esteem for those we serve.

Our organization has traditionally served persons with the most significant barriers to employment (66%), as well as a larger proportion (72%) of transition-aged youth than our peer agencies. For example, UCP partners with OOD, school districts, and local businesses at four area Project SEARCH sites where our staff provide Job Readiness Training and Job Placement Services to students with disabilities during their final year of high school. We also offer highly collaborative summer youth work experience services at several Northeast Ohio employers. Our high quality results outperform the statewide average in both quality and efficiency as evidenced by our most recent OOD Scorecard (66% closure rate vs. 54% state average).

In 2022, we placed 83 persons into integrated competitive employment, including about 70 participants supported by OOD. The impact of these workforce development activities in terms of wages earned by those placed was over \$1.1 million, not to mention taxes paid and public benefits saved. Through these vital services, we have helped 67 local businesses find qualified employees in this very challenging labor market. **Fully investing in OOD services is a very effective use of tax dollars!**

Despite these impressive results, 2022 was a very challenging year, even compared to the previous two pandemic years. We placed 30% fewer individuals into jobs and we put a pause on accepting new job coaching referrals throughout the year. In serving transition-age youth, vital pre-employment programming was put on hold due to low reimbursement levels and staffing shortages, leading to 39 fewer students being served. UCP also invested valuable resources and leveraged our extensive employer connections to develop

LeafBridge: A Center of Excellence for Children

OakLeaf: A Center of Excellence for Adults

10011 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44106 • 216-791-8363 • www.ucpcleveland.org

new and exciting summer youth work sites and increased the capacity to serve 72 participants, but we ultimately served less than half that number of young people.

Much of this decline in services is due to our inability to recruit qualified job coaches and skills trainers. Furthermore, we had a 41% turnover rate for our employment services staff last year, an historic high, largely due to many of our team members feeling unable to remain in the VR field due to low wages. So, we are losing highly skilled, dedicated employees to other job sectors that simply pay more. **This has a detrimental impact on the people we serve and the businesses who need and want to hire people with disabilities.**

The employment services system in Ohio is woefully underfunded despite a much appreciated OOD Fee Schedule increase in October 2022. Our costs of doing business have increased tremendously in the past few years. In particular, we have had to increase our staff wages by 40% since 2020, to try to compete for talent with other industries offering higher wages for entry-level jobs. This has led our agency to operate with significant deficits that initially were covered by federal pandemic relief and other one-time funding opportunities. But recently, we have had to tap our limited reserves to fund these wage increases, and this practice cannot continue for much longer. Plus, these wage increases have not been enough to attract and retain staff, as indicated by our high turnover rate in 2022.

I am very supportive of the budget initiatives outlined by Governor DeWine and Director Miller and as passed by the House for OOD. The changing labor landscape and accompanying shortage of workers threatens our ability to provide the critical supports on which the people we serve and their families rely. The budget increase to draw down the maximum federal match for VR services proposed in HB 33 is a good foundation to help our system combat these many challenges.

I would like to share a brief story about the impact high quality employment services can have on a person's life. (LaSandra happens to be Sen. Antonio's constituent.)

LaSandra was referred to UCP by her OOD VR Counselor, Kathy Richards, to participate in the Cleveland Clinic Project SEARCH job readiness training program for the 2021-22 year. She is a resident of Cleveland and graduated from James Ford Rhodes High School in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District. She completed three internship rotations at the Clinic and really excelled.

Upon completion of Project SEARCH, she worked with a UCP Job Placement Specialist to find employment at Morrison Healthcare at the Cleveland Clinic main campus as a food service worker. She grew so much throughout her time in PS and continued her personal and professional growth in her new job. She started working in June 2022, and was quickly promoted to shift lead in her department four months after she was hired.

She has received a lot of positive feedback from managers including Mrs. B, her direct supervisor. Mrs. B. said, "LaSandra has been a great blessing and brought change to the cafeteria staff. I get compliments about her almost every day about her smile and work ethic from staff and folks dining in the café. She interacts well with customers and is comfortable checking in on them. I am proud to have her on my staff, she is irreplaceable and it is an honor seeing her continue to grow."

LaSandra still lives with her grandmother and hopes to get a place of her own soon. Project SEARCH had a tremendous impact on her life. She is thankful to UCP and OOD for giving her the opportunity to gain valuable work skills to help her achieve her goals towards more personal and financial independence.

Today, LaSandra is proud to work at the world class Cleveland Clinic and to be a productive, contributing member of her community. The opportunity to receive job training, placement and coaching services through UCP and funded by OOD made all the difference in the world for LaSandra's vocational and personal success! See attached photos of LaSandra at work at the Cleveland Clinic.

The Governor's proposed budget initiative, under the leadership of Director Miller and as passed by the House, is a great foundation to stabilize, reinforce and rebuild the vocational services provided by UCP of Greater Cleveland. **I strongly urge this committee to approve the House-passed budget as it pertains to ODD.** Unlike other businesses, we cannot raise our prices to support increased wages for our team members. Increased federal and state monies will allow OOD to increase fees offered to providers, which will help us recruit and retain the workforce needed to continue to provide our vital, high quality services.

With your leadership, together we can ensure these services are available to the Ohioans with disabilities who so greatly need them! Thank you again for the opportunity and privilege to bring my concerns before you, and if I can ever be of any help in this process, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Paul J. Soprano
Director of OakLeaf Services
psoprano@ucpcleveland.org
UCP of Greater Cleveland
10011 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, OH 44106
(216) 791-8363, x1258





Lashonda Wilkerson

SUBWAY