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**Testimony on SFY 24/25 Operating Budget**

**Senate Medicaid Committee**

**Chair Romanchuk, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Ingram, and esteemed committee members,**

My name is Stephen Colecchi and I have the honor of serving as CEO of the Hattie Larlham Center for Children with Disabilities.

Hattie Larlham has a long and proud history of providing support and services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. From our humble beginnings in 1961 when Hattie and Richard Larlham opened their farmhouse on Diagonal Road in Mantua, Ohio to provide care to a disabled newborn, Hattie Larlham now provides services to over 1,500 individuals at 70+ locations across Northeast and Central Ohio.

This Committee has already heard testimony from witnesses regarding the current staffing crisis impacting the DD provider community in Ohio. **We are in a crisis.** Our challenge in recruiting and retaining employees is directly related to our inability to pay our employees an acceptable starting salary.

I am very supportive of the budget initiatives outlined by Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for additional funding for the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities. I am also very appreciative of the additional investments adopted by the Ohio House of Representatives in House Bill 33.

Hattie Larlham operates as a not-for-profit organization and is one of the largest providers of services to individuals with disabilities in the State of Ohio. We provide a full range of services including residential services at six Intermediate Care Facilities (ICFs) and over sixty Supported Living and Waiver Homes in Northeast and Central Ohio. We operate seven Adult Day Program locations and provide a wide range of Employment Services designed to help people with disabilities on their employment journeys. The Dahlberg Gibson Learning Center is Hattie Larlham's innovative early intervention program for infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children with intellectual and developmental disabilities living in Franklin County.

The staffing crisis has impacted all our programs, but I would like to focus my testimony on our flagship location the Hattie Larlham Center for Children with Disabilities. The Hattie Larlham Center is a 124-bed licensed ICF. We currently have 120 individuals living at the Center, who have significant medical issues in addition to their intellectual or developmental disabilities. The Center is a unique and special facility with outstanding and dedicated employees, who provide long term support and care to the people we serve.

To get a better sense of the individuals who rely on us for their support and care, I would like to share with you information about the residents at the Center.

- Our youngest resident at the Center is 4 years old; and our oldest resident is 50 years old.
- One of our residents has lived at the Center for 42 years.
- Ten of our residents have lived at the Center for more than 30 years.
- Twenty-nine of our residents have lived at the Center between 20 and 30 years.
- Thirty-four of our residents have lived at the Center between 10 and 20 years.
- Nine of our residents are under the age of 10.
- Forty-five of our residents are under the age of 22.

**These numbers clearly demonstrate that the Center is the permanent home for the residents who reside there. If we are not here to meet their needs – who will?**

Without question, the backbone of any DD provider are its employees. The Hattie Larlham Center relies on Direct Support Professionals (DSPs), Registered Nurses, Licensed Practical Nurses, Respiratory Therapists, Physical Therapists, and other staff to meet the complex needs of our residents.

The complex needs of our residents at the Center are evidenced by the following:

- Twenty of the residents are on ventilator support around the clock.
- Nine residents have a tracheotomy without full-time ventilator support.
- 100% of the residents are incontinent.
- 100% of the residents are non-ambulatory.
- All but two of the residents are non-verbal.
- Eleven of the residents are blind; and seventy-five are visually impaired.
- 83% of the residents are fed through a feeding tube only; and another 8% are fed a combination of oral feeding and tube feeding.

Why are these numbers so important? It is because they demonstrate that the residents who live at the Center really have no options for residential support other than a facility like the Hattie Larlham Center. Given their complex around-the-clock needs they cannot live with their parents or loved ones. A nursing home or a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) at a children's hospital is not the most appropriate setting to meet both the medical and developmental disability needs of our residents. In addition, any of these options would be significantly more expensive than an ICF such as the Hattie Larlham Center.

It is imperative that additional Medicaid funding is provided so that we can increase the hourly rate for DSPs and other employees who are required to meet the needs of the residents. We cannot continue to provide the support and care to the number of individuals we currently serve unless we are able to address our staffing needs.

**It should be obvious that a starting average salary of \$14.00 per hour is not enough to attract employees to consider working as a DSP.**

House Bill 33 as passed is a great foundation to reinforce and rebuild the services provided by Hattie Larlham and other DD providers across Ohio. We encourage this Committee to support the House's version of House Bill 33 as it pertains to DODD appropriations. Further, we encourage the Senate to invest additional dollars into these vital services and raise DSP salaries to at least an average of \$20.64.

We need to be very clear in our message. Unless additional funding is provided to Hattie Larlham, we will have no choice but to reduce the number of people we serve and to perhaps even close certain programs and services. Unless additional funding is included in the State Budget that will be effective July 1, 2023, providers across Ohio will need to reduce the number of people they serve, and other DD providers will close completely.

We collectively have the responsibility to make sure that sufficient funding is provided to pay our employees an acceptable hourly rate, allow us to compete for employees, address our staffing needs and most importantly, to help us meet the needs of our fellow Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities. These folks rely on all of us, and we cannot let them down.

Sincerely,



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