



BITTERSWEET

Bittersweet, Inc.

Testimony on SFY 24/25 Operating Budget
Senate Medicaid Committee

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

I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Dustin Watkins and I am the executive director of Bittersweet Farms, located in Lucas, Wood, and Allen Counties. We are a non-profit organization that provides residential services under the Intermediate Care Facilities for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities (ICFIID) program and residential, day and employment services through the home and community-based waiver program, administered by the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD). Our team of nearly one hundred employees are proud to provide essential services to approximately one hundred and fifty Ohioans with autism.

I am wholeheartedly in 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 in House Bill 33. The changing labor landscape and accompanying shortage of workers, including direct support professionals (DSP), threatens our ability to provide the critical supports on which the people we serve, and their families, rely.

Since our founding in 1983, we have shown a strong record of successfully serving individuals from across the autism spectrum, particularly those with complex behavioral challenges. This success relies upon a foundation of cultivated rapport and the keen insight and dedication that our DSPs have for the people they support. The extreme shortage and correlated demand for these uniquely skilled employees makes the need for competitive wages evident. Like so many of our fellow service providers, we have exhausted every effort available to deliver the fullest compensation possible for our DSPs, including targeted fundraising. Despite notable gains, we are still significantly out of balance with competing employment sectors, and increasingly limited in our capacity to meet the current and future needs of our community.

House Bill 33 as passed by the House is a great foundation to reinforce and rebuild the services provided by Bittersweet Farms. We encourage this committee to support the House's version of H.B. 33 as it pertains to DODD appropriations. Further, we encourage the Senate to invest additional dollars into these vital services to raise direct support professional wages to at least an average of \$20.64. This investment will help us recruit and retain the workforce needed to continue to provide our quality services.

As we look ahead with the knowledge that the number of people with autism continues to grow each year (currently 1 in 36 according to the CDC), we must ensure that the most vulnerable among them have

the access and availability of the services and supports required to ensure their health, safety, and overall quality of life.

With your leadership, together we can ensure these services are available to the Ohioans that 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.**



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