

Testimony of Marcy Fleisher
Substitute House Bill 33
Senate Medicaid Committee
May 11, 2023

Chairman Romanchuk, Vice Chairman Wilson, Ranking Member Ingram and members of the committee, my name is Marcy Fleisher and I am here to testify as a proponent for the language contained within Substitute House Bill 33 that requires the Ohio Department of Medicaid to cover the treatment of obesity.

Being a mom is my most important job. I'm sure many of you feel the same way about parenting. I am incredibly proud of my daughter Maddy. While she has many challenges, she is strong, smart, capable and faces things head on. Maddy's physical and mental well-being is my priority. When she was younger, doctors counseled us to treat her mood disorder with medication. We didn't know then that those meds would irreparably impact what specialists call her body weight "set" point.

Over the years we watched with pain and frankly, fear, as Maddy's weight escalated at a scary pace. Even after we stopped the medication that we believed to be the culprit, Maddy kept putting on pounds. Meal modifications, diets, trainers, behavioral therapy, nothing helped. It wasn't a matter of will or will power. Maddy just couldn't lose weight.

Of course, this has impacted her comprehensive health. Her kidneys now function at a lower capacity and without weight loss she is at higher risk for kidney disease. The excessive weight has affected her ability to move physically. The joints in her knees, back and feet are all compromised. Obesity is even a component in her recurrent yeast infections. And, being overweight makes it more likely she will develop diabetes.

Equally detrimental, has been the impact on her mental health. Too often Maddy feels badly about herself. Who she is. How she presents. How people treat her. It doesn't matter that doctors consider obesity a disease, just like heart or lung disease. The truth is the rest of the world, and the Ohio Department of Medicaid, doesn't treat it that way. As a mother, this breaks my heart.

But now there are proven medications that effectively help treat obesity. Maddy started one of these injectable medications in November. To date, she has lost more than 30 pounds. It's helping her become more mobile--she proudly shares her 10,000+ steps daily—and she is getting stronger and yes, healthier. The initial weight loss has had a positive impact on her mental health as well. She is more confident and happier. She is finding success with a new job and new friends. She's joined a young adult's social skills group and has secured new opportunities working in area theatre presentations. She's even joined the esteemed Harmony Project choir.

The benefits of Maddy steadily losing weight are easy to see. But they come with an incredibly steep price. One her father and I cannot sustain indefinitely. Maddy's medication is more than \$1,300 dollars a month. Our family can't afford this forever. I suspect many other Ohio families couldn't either.

We are grateful for the Medicaid coverage that accompanies Maddy's Level 1 waiver. It provides important support services to help Maddy. But it seems both discriminatory and short sighted that Medicaid denied coverage of her anti-obesity medication, medication that over time, will improve her health, thereby eventually saving Medicaid money! With childhood obesity rates on the rise even the American Academy of Pediatrics has released new guidelines that recommend anti-obesity medications. At our recent Medicaid hearing, Maddy's internist, psychiatrist, kidney specialist and even her gynecologist all submitted testimony that the use of medication is positively impacting Maddy's overall physical health which is integral to her mental health. Still, our appeal was denied.

Specialists in the study of obesity, like Dr. Scott Butsch, Maddy's doctor and the head of the obesity clinic at The Cleveland Clinic, understand that people cannot exercise or refrain from eating to "cure" obesity. Pharmacology is now the proven solution to treat this disease. Revising Ohio's Medicaid coverage to include prescription drugs to treat obesity is sound policy and a step in the right direction. I know for my Maddy, and Ohioans like her, it would be life changing.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before your committee. I am happy to answer any questions.