



**Interested Party testimony submitted to the
Senate Medicaid Committee
House Bill 33
Rabbi Yossi Marozov, Executive Director
Lisa Waldbaum, Parent
Adam Neides, Student
Friendship Circle of Cleveland
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Chairman Romanchuk, Vice Chair Wilson, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Medicaid Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Rabbi Yossi Marozov, and I am the Executive Director of Friendship Circle of Cleveland. I'm pleased to be here today to share with you the services Friendship Circle provides to children with disabilities and their families in the Northeast Ohio region.

Over the last few years, COVID-19 helped us appreciate the value of face-to-face friendships, and social connections. For children with disabilities, loneliness and a sense of isolation is nothing new, unfortunately. It only got much worse due to COVID-19.

Twenty years ago, my wife Estie and I brought together a handful of children with disabilities to provide them with social support through a unique formula of connecting the children with high school teen friend-makers, for friendship and connection. The program steadily grew, and grew, both in the number of participants, and the additional services that were provided.

Today, we offer more than 20 programs for social enrichment, family networking, family support and more. Hundreds of families in Northeast Ohio call Friendship Circle their community, their village that is helping them raise a child with a disability.

We are situated in Pepper Pike, an eastside suburb of Cleveland, however families from as far as Avon in Lorain County and Mentor in Lake County come to Friendship Circle because of the incredible value it adds to their child.

As a result of the pandemic, we are seeing an influx of requests to join Friendship Circle. More than 40 new families have contacted us over the last 3 months alone. That growth is unsustainable unless we have additional sources of revenue for capacity building.

Currently, our annual budget stands at \$1.5 million, of which 90% comes from a combination of private donors and Foundations. We have no endowment. Meaning that every year, we need to start from scratch and reengage all our donors to cover the budget.



I am here today to ask for your support of a \$300,000 appropriation each fiscal year for Friendship Circle. With this funding, we will be able to dramatically increase our capacity at this most critical time in our 20-year history, when our services are needed now, more than ever.

I'd like to introduce one of our Friendship Circle parents, Lisa Waldbaum to share her experience with our programs.

Chair Romanchuk and members of the committee, my name is Lisa Waldbaum and I am a parent of three boys. I live in Solon, a suburb of Cleveland.

My youngest son Alex was born in 2008 with a rare disease called Lowe Syndrome. Lowe syndrome affects the eyes, brain, and kidneys. It is a horrible illness affecting multiple organs and it is difficult to manage. Lowe Syndrome is also incredibly rare with less than 2,500 persons diagnosed worldwide. There are only 15 families in Ohio that live hundreds of miles apart from Cincinnati up to Cleveland.

There is an international Lowe Syndrome Association and they, like other organizations, raise awareness and funds for research, but there is little to no local support for families. There is little outreach for families and our children's individual struggles, which is what we desperately need.

Friendship Circle fills that void by offering tremendous support and resources to my family as well as hundreds of others facing diseases and special needs. The daily and weekly programming is an outlet for our children to develop, learn and grow in addition to the benefit and respite they provide to the parents.

Friendship Circle has changed my son Alex's life for the better. They have offered Alex a place to shine.

He began using Friendship Circle programming when he was about 8 years old. He has benefitted from programming focused on behavior, social and communication skills, fine motor skills, friendship building, and more. He will actually begin to volunteer soon in addition to being a beneficiary of the programming. This Friendship Circle model is invaluable in allowing my son to feel important while providing the confidence he needs in giving back.

Friendship Circle has given Alex a voice and lifeline. Kids like Alex have a difficult time finding peers willing to spend time and develop friendships. Loneliness for a child is debilitating. It eats at the parents too. When you see your child yearning for something more and they can't find it. Many of these children know they are different and do not know how to relate. Friendship Circle provides this "education" and safe space to develop and learn these skills alongside typical teenage volunteers for support.

I am not sure who benefits more from this programming, the typical teen who develops empathy for others (which is so desperately needed in today's world) or the special needs child. As these teens transition to adulthood, they will go forward with a greater compassion and understanding



of the challenges families like mine face which cannot always be seen, felt, or heard but is always carried on the shoulders of parents like me.

Friendship Circle truly changed my son's life from one of loneliness and despair to a vibrant life filled with programming, music, and fun all while helping to develop his skills and social life. It is the most important thing in Alex's life right now. These programs are not defined as education nor medicinal, but I would argue they are just as valuable if not more for many children and families.

Please fund these programs and allow Friendship Circle to grow and reach more families. The demand has been much higher for this programming specifically after the COVID pandemic and the terrible isolation that so many have suffered. If you allow Friendship Circle to be funded, you will open the doors to so many families in desperate need.

Thank you for allowing me to share my story.

Now I'd like to introduce Adam Neides, a teen volunteer to share his experience.

Friendship Circle has been a life-changing experience for me. I started volunteering in the summer of 2019 as a middle schooler transitioning into high school. Looking back four years later, I attribute much of my growth and maturation to Friendship Circle and the incredible community that they have built.

Over the years, I have formed many relationships and learned many valuable lessons that I am very thankful for. Friendship Circle highlights the importance of treating others equally, no matter their background or differing abilities. From this, I have learned the importance of accepting all people and embracing their differences, a quality I did not have before volunteering here.

Though I may be considered a volunteer, none of what I do is a job or a burden. Quite frankly, it is the complete opposite. It is an honor to come in every week and spend time with children who seek genuine relationships. All the connections that I have created are symbiotic, which is why I greatly appreciate them. Whether it's the staff members, friend-makers, or buddies, Friendship Circle has established an inclusive environment that I admire and am proud to be a part of.

Through the many relationships that I have developed from volunteering, I have asked various volunteers about their own experiences with Friendship Circle. The overwhelming majority of them claimed they had seen major growth within themselves and have gained many skills that they did not have prior to this.

Talking about one of my good friends specifically, he said that coming here was a bit out of his comfort zone. He had never built friendships with special needs children before, and with me being the only volunteer he knew, it took a few days for him to ease into things. After these first couple of days passed, he "saw himself blossom from a personal standpoint. Through Friendship



Circle's kind and accepting environment, it was effortless fitting in with their diverse community.

My perspective on life has changed and I attribute volunteering for my increased effort of having an inclusive worldview. Coming to Friendship Circle has been a fantastic experience for me and I am so appreciative of the opportunity to create new friendships. The immense growth that I have seen in myself, and others has been truly inspiring.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.