



Kerstin Sjoberg, Executive Director of Disability Rights Ohio
Interested Party Testimony on House Bill 33
Senate Medicaid Committee
May 11, 2023

Chair Romanchuk, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Medicaid Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written-only interested party testimony on House Bill 33 (HB 33) the state's biennial budget. My name is Kerstin Sjoberg and I am the Executive Director of Disability Rights Ohio (DRO).

DRO is the state's designated protection and advocacy system with the mission to advocate for an equitable Ohio for people with disabilities. DRO would like to applaud the Governor for making substantial investments to increase funding for direct care worker wages and the House building upon these investments in the substitute version of HB 33. This is an incredible step forward to ensure disabled Ohioans can live independently in their homes and communities. The home and community-based service (HCBS) system has been historically underfunded and now more than ever there is a critical need to ensure individuals can access care in their homes.

This testimony will address two (2) issues related to the substitute version of HB 33:

- 1) The need to increase wages for direct care workers; and**
- 2) Increasing disabled representation on county boards of developmental disabilities.**

I. Direct Care Worker Wages

DRO applauds the House for establishing an average wage for direct care workers to \$17/hr in 2024 and \$18/hr in 2025. This is a necessary investment, but more is needed. Disabled advocates and caregivers are advocating for base wages of at least \$20/hour to ensure disabled Ohioans have the support they need to live independently in their communities. In addition, we applaud the committee for ensuring wage increases are applied across all service systems –Medicaid, Aging, and Developmental Disabilities. Currently, wages differ across systems leading to direct care workers to leave one system for another.

In addition to wages, to ensure the direct care workforce is stabilized there needs to be a mechanism establishing long-term wage growth and support for paid benefits. Currently, nursing homes have a structured rebasing system to increase rates but a similar mechanism does not exist for home and community-based services and supports. By establishing a similar structure, the legislature would be able to ensure sustainability in a system historically underfunded. And by increasing funding to provide benefits to these essential workers, Ohio will be able to attract a high-quality workforce supporting disabled people to live independently in their homes and communities.

II. Increasing disabled representation on county boards of developmental disabilities

The House amended Governor DeWine's proposal to require county boards of developmental disabilities appoint at least one individual who is eligible to receive services by providing the ability for county commissioners to appoint someone not eligible to receive services so long as a letter is provided to the county board with an explanation as to why an appointment was not possible. This new language does not satisfy the original intent as proposed by Governor DeWine and allows counties to circumvent an important shift in representation of disabled people in systems that provide them services. Disabled Ohioans should be at the decision-making table, especially when those decisions are about services affecting them. Governor DeWine's proposed provision was a clear step towards equitable policies for disabled Ohioans, the House version is a step backwards.

DRO appreciates the time and consideration of these important pieces within HB 33. Raising wages and increasing representation are two important steps forward to ensure disabled Ohioans can live independently in their homes and communities. We look forward to working with members of this committee and the Senate as the bill moves forward.

Thank you again for opportunity to provide interested party testimony in consideration of HB 33, please feel free to reach out to me or Jordan Ballinger, Policy Director at 614-466-7264 x135 or jballinger@disabilityrightsohio.org.