



**Ohio Department of Children and Youth  
State Fiscal Years 2026 – 2027  
February 25, 2025**

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. It is an honor to present the Ohio Department of Children and Youth's (DCY) Fiscal Years 2026–2027 operating budget request.

**Doing What's Right for Ohio's Kids... And Seeing Results**

Two years ago, Governor Mike DeWine and the 135th General Assembly launched DCY with one guiding principle: Do What's Right for Kids. This is more than a mission statement. It is a commitment to listening to the voices of Ohio families, making data-driven decisions, and investing in real solutions that improve – and save -- lives.

In the past 18 months, we have:

- Convened 15 family engagement sessions across the state to hear their concerns for their own children and their ideas for how we can better support them.
- Connected with more than 350 youth, parents, and caregivers to learn from their lived experiences.
- Partnered with more than 700 community stakeholders to develop and drive solutions.

The feedback we have received has been invaluable to us as we seek solutions to improve the lives of our children, and I carry their sentiments with me every day. The advice of one young Ohio woman who had aged out of foster care system has really stuck with me:

***“Remember that behind every policy is a person.”***

Her words embody our mission and drive our decision-making. Every policy we adopt and every dollar we invest must lead to better outcomes for people.



We all know that systemic change isn't easy, and it isn't fast. But I am pleased to report that with the determination of the dedicated employees at DCY and active engagement of countless stakeholders, we are seeing real, measurable progress on the three goals we outlined as we stood up the new agency.

## Goal 1: Reducing Infant Mortality: Giving Every Baby a Fighting Chance

Every year, more than 900 Ohio babies die before their first birthday. That is 900 families experiencing unimaginable loss, 900 dreams cut short, 900 reminders that we must do better. **But for the first time in years, we are seeing real progress.**

In 2024, Ohio's infant mortality rate declined to 6.5 per 1,000 live births—saving 80 more babies than the year before. That's the equivalent of four full kindergarten classrooms of children who will now have the opportunity to reach their full potential. This progress is not a coincidence. Rather it is the result of listening to families, measuring progress, and investing in what works.

### Scaling Proven Models – Growing Community-Led Solutions

Cradle Cincinnati has reduced infant mortality in Hamilton County by 30 percent over the past 19 months by rigorous accountability to data and active engagement with the mothers in that community who are impacted the most. This is especially noteworthy given that Hamilton County previously had one of the worst infant mortality rates in Ohio and even in the country. The state of Ohio and local communities alike can learn a lot from their leadership and expertise. That is why we created –the “Partner for Change” grant to increase this successful community-based model to four additional counties: Cuyahoga, Franklin, Lucas, and Montgomery where nearly 45% of Ohio's infant deaths occur.

### Investing in Fathers—Strengthening Families

Research shows that when fathers are engaged, babies are more likely to be born full-term and at a healthy weight. But too often, fathers don't have the support they need to be involved. That is why we are increasing fatherhood programs through the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood and increasing funding for Ohio's Parenting and Pregnancy Centers to support families through pregnancy and the baby's first year.



## **Increasing Home Visiting Services—Setting Up Families for Success**

Our evidence-based home visiting programs provide personalized support to expectant parents and families with young children. Through this budget, we will grow home visiting access to 25,000 additional children and make Family Connects Ohio available in all 88 counties assuring that all new parents in Ohio are offered free home visits from a registered nurse. Family Connects has realized tremendous results with connected babies having 50 percent fewer trips to the emergency room. Connected mothers are 30 percent less likely to experience postpartum clinical or mental health complications.

With these highly targeted and evidence-informed strategies, we believe we can save an estimated 330 babies each year -- six babies every week. One almost every day.

DCY is requesting an additional \$53 million across the biennium to support these critical, life-saving efforts to support Ohio's children and families.

## **Goal 2: Improving Kindergarten Readiness: Giving Every Child a Strong Start**

Today, only one in three Ohio children enter kindergarten fully prepared. For Black and Hispanic children, that number drops to fewer than one in five. Numerous studies have illustrated that children with consistent access to high-quality early learning are much more likely to be ready to learn when they enroll in school. Creating this strong foundation for our young children ensures success not only in school but also in life. At the same time, early care and education for young children also creates opportunities for parents to work or complete their own education so they can provide for their families. It is why a comprehensive early care and education system is a two-generation strategy: support the workforce of today while preparing the workforce for tomorrow which is why DCY is requesting an increase in federal appropriation of \$70 million in SFY 2026 and \$115 million in SFY 2027 to continue support of these critical investments.

Safe, affordable, and reliable early care and education, such as child care and preschool, is not a luxury – it is a fundamental pillar of economic opportunity and family well-being. When parents have access to high-quality child care, they can work, pursue an education, and build



financial security for their families. When they don't, the consequences ripple across families, businesses, and the economy.

Today, 44 percent of parents report experiencing work disruptions due to child care challenges, and 49 percent have been forced to cut back on work fewer hours to stay home to care for their children. The impact is especially significant for Ohio's working mothers. In a recent survey, more than 60 percent of Ohio moms with children under five who are not working or working part-time say they would increase their work hours or return to work if they had access to affordable child care.

By now it is widely known, but still worth repeating, that child care costs in Ohio are outpacing the cost of housing, health care, and even in-state college tuition. A family with one infant and one toddler can expect to pay nearly \$22,000 per year for child care – an expense that can consume more than 39 percent of a single parent's annual income.

That means almost \$11 of every hour worked goes to paying for child care. For child care to be considered affordable, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends that it should not exceed seven percent of a family's income. Yet for too many Ohio families, child care remains financially out of reach.

To address these challenges, Governor DeWine has increased access to high-quality child care through bold, data-driven solutions. The Child Care Choice Voucher Program, which serves families earning up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), provides safe, reliable, and high-quality child care options in schools, centers, and home-based settings. Through Child Care Choice, we have already connected 7,100 additional children with high-quality early learning programs in just 10 months. At the same time, this program has enabled more than 4,800 families to join or grow Ohio's workforce and is a huge success.

But don't just take my word for it. Listen to what Ohio families are saying about Child Care Choice:

- 85% of parents tell us the program "helps them be at school or work for longer hours or more often."
- 60% of parents share that they "worry less about their child's safety when they are not with them."
- More than half report that these programs "better prepare their child for school."



- One parent described the voucher as “life changing...it allows me to produce income to feed my children and ensure they’re clothed and housed...this program is a blessing to Ohio families.”
- Another parent observed, “If it weren’t for this program, my child care cost would be over half of my income monthly.”

In this budget, Governor DeWine is building on this success by **maintaining eligibility** growth for the state’s public child care program and maintaining the Child Care Choice Voucher Program to help an additional 20,000 families return to work, increase work hours, or enroll in job training programs. The proposal also **caps child care copayments** at seven percent of income for families in the Publicly Funded Child Care program, saving a working family of four nearly \$8 per hour of earnings. It also **raises provider reimbursement rates** to reflect current market conditions and comply with federal regulations. Access to quality child care is a proven strategy to improving outcomes. Recent data shows Ohio’s students that had access to early care and education are at least 2.4 times more likely to Demonstrate Kindergarten Readiness.

But Governor DeWine’s administration’s commitment to improving Ohio’s child care system goes beyond increasing access to Child Care Choice. At his direction, DCY has made it simpler, more efficient, and more effective for families and providers alike. To reduce administrative burdens while driving better outcomes, we streamlined the quality rating system, ensuring that providers can focus on delivering high-quality care rather than navigating complex bureaucracy and paperwork. We unified the application process across early care and education programs, eliminating duplication and creating one seamless entry point for families seeking child care assistance. With these improvements, we are ensuring that Ohio parents have easier access to the care they need, and providers have the support they need to deliver high-quality, affordable child care.

The Department of Children and Youth knows that the child care challenge requires a multi-pronged approach that also includes increasing capacity of child care and preschool programs. Since the department’s inception, and in partnership with the Ohio General Assembly, we have increased the supply of family child care by adding more than 100 new in-home child care providers through targeted grants and mentoring. At the same time, we created more than 5,000 new child care slots by strategically investing \$85 million in one-time access grants and \$30 million in Infant/Toddler Infrastructure grants.



In addition to investing in child care and preschool strategies, we are also requesting additional funds to grow two proven, high-impact programs: Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Ohio and Early Intervention services.

**Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Ohio** is already transforming early literacy across the state, delivering a free book every month to 62 percent of Ohio's children from birth to age five. But this program is about more than free books -- it's about nurturing a love of learning, strengthening family bonds, and preparing children for school success.

Understanding the unique challenges faced by kids who are in the care of children services, DCY has prioritized enrolling Ohio's foster children, ensuring they too receive personalized mail with their name on it containing their monthly book -- offering a small but powerful sense of stability and belonging. To date, more than 5,200 Ohio children in foster care have been enrolled in the program and are receiving their very own books each month.

The impact of the Dolly Parton Imagination Library is clear. A 2023 study found that nearly 80 percent of participating families reported reading with their child more frequently after receiving the books and 90 percent of parents said the program helped better prepare their child for kindergarten.

There are other children and families who need extra support as well. Our **Early Intervention Program** provides critical support for infants and toddlers with developmental delays, ensuring that children get the help they need before they enter school. Last year alone, we served an additional 1,100 children, and the results speak for themselves. One in three children who receive Early Intervention services no longer need specialized support by the time they enter kindergarten. The program has been shown to improve school readiness, reduce the need for costly future interventions, and set children on a path to success.

### **Goal 3: Keeping Families Together—Reducing Foster Care Entry**

Since December 2019, Ohio has reduced the number of children in foster care from 16,455 to 14,213 – the lowest level since 2016. But far too many children still enter the system because their families lack the support they need to stay together.



To fully implement Governor DeWine's Children Services Transformation and enhance prevention efforts, we are requesting \$45 million in SFY 26 and \$40 million in SFY 27 to support two primary strategies – Child Wellness Campuses and local public children services agencies.

The **Child Wellness Campuses** will create new placement and treatment options for children in custody of a public children services agency (PCSA) or at risk of being in custody of a PCSA who otherwise would be at risk of spending the night in an unlicensed setting. These regional campuses will support children in crisis near their home and create additional short-term treatment options. After year two, our goal is that this initiative be sustainable through services provided by the campuses. This proposal is supported and recommended as a priority by the Children Services Working Group, Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO), and the County Commissioners Association of Ohio (CCAO).

The **State Child Protection Allocation (SCPA)** is the primary funding support provided to the county public children service agencies (PCSAs). In conjunction with local and federal dollars, these funds are the primary source available for the operations of the child protection system and are necessary to support the costs of investigations of abuse and neglect, the care for children in out of placements such as foster and congregate care, kinship care, and other operational needs. The cost of care is rising in the current biennium, and these resources are necessary to ensure the system has the capacity to meet the needs of Ohio children experiencing abuse and neglect. Increased support to the SCPA line will support the community and offset the increases in cost of care, the transition from collecting Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability payments, and the creation of the kinship streamlining and certification process. Additionally, we have requested changes to the Ohio Revised Code to support future cost containment and reduce administrative burden by allowing DCY to create a statewide infrastructure.

## Closing

At DCY, we never lose sight of the faces behind the figures.

We are not just funding programs, we are funding hope, opportunity, and brighter futures for Ohio's kids.



Together, we can ensure that every baby has a chance to thrive, every child enters school ready to learn, and every family has the support they need to stay together.

I look forward to working with you to continue doing what's right for Ohio's kids.

Thank you for your continued trust, support, partnership, and guidance.