



OHIO PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION TESTIMONY ON HB 96 SFY 2026-27 OPERATING BUDGET

OHIO HOUSE CHILDREN & HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

February 26, 2025

Chairman White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett and members of the Ohio House Children and Youth Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 96, Governor Mike DeWine's Executive Budget Proposal for state fiscal years 2026-2027.

My name is Dustin McKee, and I am the CEO of the Ohio Psychological Association (OPA). OPA represents the more than 3,500 psychologists who currently practice in Ohio. Our state's psychologists practice in community and private settings, hospitals, businesses, and academia. Psychologists in Ohio are the scientist practitioners of the behavioral health (BH) system, producing the scientific research, innovation and knowledge about the best practices in behavioral healthcare. Our members leverage this psychological science and our clinical experience in both clinical and non-clinical settings to improve the mental health and wellness of Ohioans.

OPA has identified several key policy and advocacy priority areas for the next biennium. They are as follows: Addressing the Behavioral Health Workforce Crisis, Improving Access to Treatment and Services for every Ohioan, Insurance Reform, Expanding Prevention Efforts and Mental Health Parity Enforcement. We are pleased to report that the Governor's 'As Introduced' budget addresses all these priority areas.

The Governor's budget continues to build on the Historic accomplishments of this Administration as well as the significant work and noteworthy accomplishments of members of this committee and the Ohio General Assembly as a whole. We applaud Governor DeWine and his cabinet Directors for the proposals in HB 96 and for the historic investments in and focus on mental health and substance use care during his time as Governor. We urge the Ohio House to continue building on their behavioral health system-related accomplishments over the last several years by supporting the initiatives and investments in the behavioral health of Ohioans contained within HB 96.

Below is a description of items in this budget that OPA supports along with two specific OPA budget requests (in blue):

OHIO DEPARTMENT OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH (DBH)

- **Behavioral Health Workforce Development:** OPA supports DBH's proposed funding in HB 96 to support workforce development initiatives and address the need for trained professionals in the behavioral health sector, including psychologists.

OPA strongly supports and is grateful for the work of DBH in this area. OPA appreciates DBH's redoubled efforts to bring psychologists-in-training to doctoral internship and post-doctoral placements at Ohio's six state psychiatric hospitals through the forthcoming **Grow Your Own Psychologist** Program. To protect the health and wellness of Ohioans and ensure full implementation of this program, we urge the Ohio House to continue to fully fund our state's six, state-run psychiatric hospitals so Ohio may continue to provide world-class treatment for people with the most severe and/or acute mental health conditions.

- **Crisis Services and Stabilization:** OPA supports the Department of Behavioral Health's initiatives to expand statewide access to rapid mobile response and stabilization services for youth experiencing emotional or behavioral health crises, ensuring timely support for affected families.
- **Recovery Housing Certification:** OPA supports DBH's initiative to ensure quality in recovery housing through a proposed certification process for recovery housing residences to ensure quality and safety standards are met, with a registry maintained for public reference.
- **Criminal Justice Services Enhancement:** As part the long-standing efforts championed by Governor DeWine and our esteemed colleague and behavioral health champion Ohio Supreme Court Justice Evelyn Stratton (Retired) to end the revolving door between jail, homelessness and the emergency room, OPA strongly supports efforts to combine existing drug reimbursement programs into a unified Behavioral Health Drug Reimbursement Program so that our state continues to expand support to community-based correctional facilities and county jails.
- **Appalachian Children Coalition Support:** OPA supports the proposal in HB 96 providing funds to the Appalachian Children Coalition to address systemic challenges faced by children in Ohio's Appalachian regions, focusing on mental health and addiction services.
- **Coordinated Specialty Care for First Episode Psychosis:** OPA supports the Administration's funding proposal in this area that will support coordinated specialty care teams assisting individuals experiencing their first episode of psychosis, facilitating early intervention and treatment. Research shows that the long-term prognosis of a person dramatically improves when they receive care quickly and effectively after their first episode of psychosis. This prevents needless suffering of people with mental health conditions and their families, and ultimately saves the State of Ohio significant resources.

The initiatives listed above reflect Governor DeWine and DBH's commitment to strengthening its behavioral health system through targeted investments in crisis intervention, recovery support, workforce development, criminal justice collaboration, regional assistance, and early intervention services. Again, OPA is exceptionally **grateful to Governor DeWine, Director Cornyn, DBH Staff** and the Ohio General Assembly for their game changing focus on this area.

Workforce Development Grants for Psychology Internships

The Ohio Psychological Association also urges members of this committee to **support OPA's proposal** to appropriate specific funding to support a targeted grant program **to bring more doctoral psychology interns to Ohio** by providing incentives to psychologists in training by enhancing the stipends offered to them by their prospective Ohio APA-accredited internship sites. OPA research from 2025 indicates that between 1/3rd – 2/3rds of doctoral psychology students who complete an Ohio-based doctoral internship (similar to a medical student residency), stay in Ohio to practice after becoming licensed as a psychologist.

OPA appreciates DBH's commitment to making this priority during the last two years of collaborative workforce development efforts with behavioral health stakeholders. OPA respectfully requests that the Ohio General Assembly specifically authorize a minimum of \$450K to support a grant program for this purpose to ensure that Ohio can compete for the best and the brightest psychologists in training in our nation. Specifically authorizing funding for this purpose will go a long way towards addressing Ohio's behavioral health workforce crisis by bringing more psychologists to Ohio and leveraging the outstanding expertise of psychologists in diagnosing and treating patients and creating and disseminating evidence-based programming.

OHIO DEPARTMENT OF INSURANCE (ODI)

- **Ending Involuntary Fees for EFT Reimbursements:** OPA supports ODI's efforts to end involuntary fees charged by insurance plans for payments to psychologists and other health and behavioral health providers when reimbursement payments are made through Electronic Fund Transfers (EFT's). These unfair and unwarranted EFT fees, combined with other unnecessary and counterproductive insurance practices often result in an average of approximately 3% to 5% less in provider reimbursements. This is happening quietly, at time when inefficient insurance processes & procedures and insufficient rates for behavioral health services are driving a substantial portion of psychologists & behavioral health providers to opt out of accepting private insurance .

This accelerating trend is alarming because it is shrinking our capacity to provide life saving care to Ohioans who rely on health insurance to pay the cost of their care. Our psychologists and other behavioral health providers in the private insurance system are typically very small businesses. We must stop the flight of our state's existing behavioral health workforce – the licensed providers *already in Ohio and able to deliver care now* - from fleeing our insurance-based mental health system because of unfair and unwarranted fees, as well as other unnecessary and counterproductive insurance practices that are decreasing access to life saving care.

- **Enhanced Mental Health Parity Enforcement:** OPA supports ODI's work to strengthen the enforcement of mental health parity laws, ensuring that insurance providers offer equitable coverage for mental health and substance use disorder services.
- **Expansion of Consumer Assistance Programs:** OPA supports ODI's proposal for the Ohio Senior Health Insurance Information Program (OSHIIP) so it can broaden its outreach and support services. This expansion aims to assist more consumers in understanding their behavioral health coverage options and navigating the complexities of insurance benefits related to mental health and substance use disorders.
- **Interagency Collaboration Initiatives:** OPA strongly supports ODI's initiatives to establish new collaborative programs with the Ohio Department of Behavioral Health. These initiatives focus on integrating insurance oversight with behavioral health service delivery, aiming to improve access to care and streamline processes for consumers seeking behavioral health services.

OPA would like to **commend Governor DeWine, ODI Director French and her excellent Staff** for their historic efforts to expand access to behavioral health care. Their efforts over the last 6 years have been extraordinary and have resulted in significant progress in this area.

OHIO DEPARTMENT OF MEDICAID

- **Maintaining Medicaid Behavioral Health Services Rates:** Maintain the rates for these services set in HB 33, which help combat the workforce shortages facing Medicaid behavioral healthcare providers, including psychologists.

DOING MORE WITH LESS

Integrated Care & Interdisciplinary Consultation

The Ohio Psychological Association (OPA) respectfully requests an amendment to HB 96 that authorizes Medicaid reimbursement for the new G codes (G0546–G0551) to support inter-professional consultations between behavioral health professionals and primary care providers.

With Ohio facing a behavioral health workforce crisis and increasing demand for services, authorizing these G codes would foster vital collaborative relationships that **enhance the capacity of primary care physicians to address behavioral health** concerns. Authorizing these codes will also help ensure the completion of referrals to psychologists and other behavioral health professionals by physicians - **helping patients get care *instead of getting lost*** in a sea of providers who are not taking new patients or who have months-long wait times.

This initiative aligns with Ohio's long-running efforts to integrate behavioral health with primary care, helping to address wait times and improve access to mental health services. By incentivizing expert-to-expert consultations, authorizing these new CMS provided G codes will strengthen the behavioral health system, complementing existing programs like the CPC, and ultimately improve care for Ohio's citizens. This is a proven way of saving Medicaid dollars in the short and long-term.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION & WORKFORCE (DEW)

OPA strongly supports the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce's (DEW) commitment to student behavioral health in the biennial budget. Investments in Student Wellness and Success Funds (SWSF) are critical for expanding school-based mental health services, ensuring students have access to needed support. OPA also recognizes the value of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in fostering safe, supportive learning environments while reducing disciplinary actions that can hinder student success. Additionally, early childhood mental health consultation programs play a vital role in promoting social-emotional development and school readiness. These initiatives reflect a proactive approach to addressing student mental health needs, aligning with OPA's mission to advance psychological well-being across Ohio.

DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN & YOUTH (DCY)

The Ohio Psychological Association supports DCY's budget initiatives aimed at expanding access to behavioral health services for children in foster care, kinship care, and adoption. OPA also supports DCY's efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect by funding community-based programs through the Ohio Children's Trust Fund, enhancing early intervention and parenting support. Additionally, we support the coordination of services through the Family and Children First initiative and the promotion of permanency by streamlining adoption and kinship care processes to reduce instability and foster emotional well-being.

OPA also supports the further development and dissemination of Regional Child Wellness Campuses to provide safe, supportive spaces for children awaiting placement, ensuring timely access to mental health services and reducing unnecessary displacements. These campuses will offer assessments and treatment, prioritizing the well-being of children in the juvenile justice system. The Ohio Psychological Association

(OPA) believes this initiative aligns with our advocacy to improve mental health outcomes for youth by providing environments where behavioral health services are integrated into the care process, fostering better long-term outcomes for children and families.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS SERVICES (DVS)

OPA supports DVS' biennial budget initiatives and applauds DVS's work aimed at enhancing behavioral health support for veterans. These initiatives focus on suicide prevention, expanded mental health and wellness programs, and substance use disorder treatment to address the unique challenges veterans face. Additionally, the proposal emphasizes strengthening behavioral health partnerships and providing specialized training for Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) to better identify and assist veterans in need. By prioritizing these efforts, the budget aims to improve access to critical mental health services, promote recovery, and enhance overall well-being for Ohio's veteran community.

DEPARTMENT OF JOB & FAMILY SERVICES (JFS)

The Ohio Psychological Association supports the state budget initiatives aimed at enhancing protective services by allocating funds to improve child and adult protective services, including addressing behavioral health needs for vulnerable populations. We also support the continued funding of refugee services that secure access to behavioral health resources, supporting mental health and integration. Additionally, OPA supports the enhancement of the Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program (CCMEP), which incorporates mental health treatment as part of its comprehensive services to help individuals achieve employment and self-sufficiency.

DEPARTMENT OF DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES (DODD)

The Ohio Psychological Association supports DODD's efforts to enhance care for Multi-System Youth by addressing the complex needs of youth requiring services from multiple systems, including behavioral health interventions. We also support the Employment First Initiative, which promotes employment opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities, recognizing that meaningful employment positively impacts mental health and overall well-being.

CONCLUSION

This budget sustains the momentum to improve the behavioral health system in Ohio which has been accelerated in historic ways by Governor Mike DeWine. More work must be done to address the behavioral health needs of all Ohioans – our state's children, veterans, rural and urban Ohioans, and other vulnerable populations within our state. Wait times in our state for behavioral health services continue to be too long, often lasting weeks and even months before individuals receive care.

OPA commends Governor DeWine and the Ohio General Assembly for making historic investments in Ohio's Behavioral Health System. We look forward to continuing to work with this Administration and members of the Ohio General Assembly to continue to address the mental health and addiction needs of our fellow Ohioans. The Ohio General Assembly and Governor DeWine are leaving a legacy for our children and grandchildren in the behavioral health domain. Let's keep these efforts going!

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today, I am happy to answer any questions you have at this time.