



**Interested Party Testimony- House Children and Human Services Committee
HB 96 — FY26-27 State Operating Budget
February 26, 2025**

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the Children and Human Services Committee — Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 96. My name is Tonya Fulwider, and I serve as the Executive Director of Mental Health America of Ohio.

Mental Health America of Ohio was founded in 1956 as an affiliate of Mental Health America, the nation's leading community-based nonprofit dedicated to addressing the needs of those living with mental illness and promoting the overall mental health of all Americans. Since our inception, we have remained committed to guiding Ohioans to vital mental health services that might otherwise be inaccessible.

We work in close collaboration with many partners across the state—including the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services—and, as members of Ohio's behavioral health collaborative, the Coalition for Healthy Communities. We support the proposed budget by the Department, as we believe it aligns with our organization's priorities and the state's broader mental health goals.

Today, we aim to highlight three critical areas that require focused investment: perinatal (or maternal) mental health, strengthening our behavioral health workforce, and the vital role of Peer Recovery Supporters in the care continuum. I will discuss the urgent need to address perinatal mental health in Ohio, as well as briefly touch on the importance of peers. Meanwhile, my colleague, Maggie Hallett, will offer her insights on strengthening the behavioral health workforce and the role of Peer Recovery Supporters. We believe that prioritizing these areas is key to building a healthier Ohio, where every individual has access to the behavioral health resources they need.

Depression and other mental health conditions are the most common complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Mental health conditions – including suicide and overdose – are the leading cause of death for pregnant and new mothers in Ohio and have been since 2008. These are preventable deaths.

The implications of untreated perinatal mental health challenges extend far beyond the immediate well-being of mothers; they affect the long-term health and development of children as well. Mental health struggles during pregnancy and the first year postpartum can impair a mother's ability to bond with her baby and care for her family. Infants born to mothers with untreated perinatal mental health conditions are at higher risk for preterm birth and low birth weight, leading causes of infant mortality. Left unaddressed, these challenges may lead to developmental delays in children and an increased risk of ongoing maternal health complications. By investing in robust mental health support during this critical period, we not only enhance the emotional well-being of

mothers but also foster healthier outcomes for families, laying a strong foundation for our children's future.

Addressing these challenges requires a cohesive and integrated approach, and the Ohio Perinatal Mental Health Task Force exemplifies this model. This statewide, multidisciplinary coalition is dedicated to improving the perinatal mental health system by advancing policies and practices that comprehensively support pregnant and parenting individuals facing mental health and substance use challenges. Drawing on the expertise of OB/GYNs, social workers, behavioral health providers, community health workers, and others—including individuals with lived experience—the task force is committed to positioning Ohio as a leader in perinatal mental health education, access, and treatment.

It is also important to recognize that pregnant and new mothers face unique barriers to accessing mental health care—barriers that can leave them especially vulnerable during a critical period of their lives. Peer-led programs have demonstrated remarkable success in connecting mothers with life-saving mental health and substance use care. Given their proven effectiveness and cost-efficiency, continued and enhanced support for these initiatives is essential to ensure that pregnant and new mothers have access to the care they need.

We are encouraged by the progress made by the Ohio Perinatal Mental Health Task Force and access-to-care programming. We are confident that with sustained investment, Ohio can be a leader in supporting new mothers and their children. For these reasons, we respectfully urge the General Assembly to prioritize perinatal mental health services in the upcoming state budget, ensuring that every new family across Ohio has the support and resources needed to thrive.

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

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