

Ohio House of Representatives  
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Written Testimony of  
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Thank you, Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and distinguished members of the House Children and Human Services Committee for this opportunity to submit written testimony in support of House Bill 96, the state operating budget as proposed by Governor Mike DeWine.

My name is Julie Stone, and I have the privilege of serving as the Executive Director of the Ohio Head Start Association. Because Head Start programs are funded federally directly to local partnerships, many people are not aware of the critical role Head start plays for Ohio's zero to five population. In Ohio, the Head Start community includes 59 provider agencies, with over 7,000 staff serving over 27,000 Head Start and Early Head Start children and their families in all 88 Ohio counties in more than 700 centers.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs provide child-centered, family focused, comprehensive community-based services to our Ohio's most vulnerable children and families. That includes pregnant women, infants, toddlers, and children up to age 5, whose income is less than the Federal Poverty Level and those children who are experiencing homelessness, in foster care and Kinship Families. And Head Start services are uniquely available to children with disabilities and other special needs.

The Governor's proposed budget is a significant step forward in making Ohio a better place for children and families. We also applaud the work of the team at the Ohio Department of Children and Youth (DCY), under the leadership of Director Kara Wentz to achieve three bold goals for our children: 1) reduce infant mortality, 2) improve kindergarten readiness, and 3) reduce the rate of children entering the foster care system. We are proud to work together with DCY and our early childhood colleagues across the state on these critical goals.

We must build a stronger foundation for Ohio's children. The lack of investment in our state's young children and child care leaves Ohio's young children behind and jeopardizes our future workforce. Making Ohio the best place for children is why we are speaking in support of HB 96 as it contains **key initiatives that** support young children, and it enables **parents and caregivers to remain connected to the workforce and provide for their families.**

These initiatives include:

- **Increasing access to high quality, affordable child care for working families at or below 200% the Federal Poverty Level (FPL)** and increase access to full-time public preschool slots comparable to full-time PFCC subsidies to support the healthy development of children and improve parental workforce participation.
- Enact a **partially refundable state child tax credit for families with children, birth to six years old, to reduce poverty, support working families and invest in children.** This state Child Tax Credit would provide families with financial relief: \$1,000 per child under age 7 for families earning below a certain income.

- **Expand access to evidence-based home visiting programs**, including Early Head Start, utilizing Medicaid to leverage access and impact, to support the healthy development of all of Ohio's children.
- **Invest in local infant mortality collaborative models in communities with high rates of infant mortality** and racial disparities that require health systems, managed care plans, impacted communities, and Black moms to co-create and implement a plan of action to reduce infant and maternal mortality.
- **Support quality early learning experiences that prepare children for kindergarten.**
  - Increased investment in the Ohio Governor's Imagination Library.
  - Continued commitment to curriculum aligned to the science of reading.

We also urge you to include initiatives to:

- **Leverage Head Start along with other funding streams to build more quality capacity to support the unique needs of preschoolers with suspected or identified special needs and those families who would benefit the most from comprehensive intensive services.**
- **Leverage state and federal funding to support a fairly compensated and competitive early childhood education workforce.**

**Ohio's young children and families need your support for House Bill 96 and the initiatives detailed in the proposed budget for the Ohio Department of Children and Youth as submitted.**

These initiatives are also critical to the current workforce and Ohio's economy. Safe, affordable, and reliable early care and education, such as child care and preschool, should not be luxuries. According to a recent study by Groundwork Ohio, 44 percent of parents reported 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.

It's clear that parents who have access to high-quality child care and preschool are better able to work, pursue an education, and build a better life for their families. We see this at Head Start programs every day as over **21,000** Ohio Head Start parents are employed, in school, or in a job training program because they have access to care. In Ohio, Head Start provides a safe environment where children are thriving, so parents are able to focus on providing for their families by contributing to the workforce.

We must find ways to increase access for children and families, to services and support. Our current and future workforce are counting on you.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. Please reach out to me if you have any questions about the content of this testimony.

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