

Testimony on HB 96 (FY26-27 State Budget)
by Holly Weatherson, Director of Early Intervention
Belmont, Harrison and Noble County Boards of DD
2/27/2025



Chairwoman White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee:

My name is Holly Weatherson. I am the Director of Early Intervention for the Belmont, Harrison, and Noble County Boards of Developmental Disabilities (DD). Located in the heart of Appalachia in southeastern Ohio, our boards annually support approximately 360 families in our combined Early Intervention programs, which is the topic of my testimony today.

In addition to my role at BHN, I am also appearing today on behalf of Ohio's 88 county boards of DD through our state association. Founded by families nearly six decades ago, county boards of DD now provide a lifetime of services and supports for more than 107,000 people statewide—including more than 29,000 infants and toddlers with developmental disabilities.

Access to Early Intervention (EI) services is a fundamental right afforded by Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA. As providers of EI services, county boards of DD have built an unparalleled network of service coordinators, developmental specialists, occupational/physical/speech therapists who are experts in family-centered practices.

To give you a sense of the needs that babies and toddlers present when they are referred for Early Intervention services, I would like to share the story of Ellie and her family—who gave us permission to share their journey with you today.

Ellie came to us after being referred to Early Intervention services when she was just five weeks old. Ellie was born premature at 35 weeks gestation with no prenatal care and intrauterine drug exposure.

Upon her birth, Ellie was treated for drug withdrawal symptoms and hospitalized for 39 days. After being discharged from medical care, she was placed with her maternal grandparents, who were initially hesitant to receive our support.

Today, grandma and grandpa have built a strong relationship with Ellie's EI team. They actively participate in services and are implementing recommended strategies throughout their everyday routines. Ellie is beginning to meet her developmental milestones. Grandma is thankful for our support and is grateful for Ellie's positive progress.

Ellie is just one example of the many children supported by Early Intervention. Families and children present with a wide range of delays and needs that require an individualized approach to help support their development.

Our Early Intervention programs have grown tremendously in recent years. And there is no sign of these numbers declining any time soon.

As the sole local government entity providing Early Intervention (EI) services to children with developmental disabilities under the age of three, county boards of DD across Ohio have experienced a significant rise in demand. From State Fiscal Year 2016 until State Fiscal Year 2023, county board statewide referrals for Early Intervention services grew an unprecedented 34.4%, with the number of children receiving EI services growing at nearly the exact same rate—34.1%—in this period. In my

own home counties, we have experienced a staggering 273% increase in the number of children receiving Early Intervention since 2016.

This explosive growth has dramatically increased referral and service costs in our system. As a result, the cost of service coordination regularly exceeds the amount provided by the state's service coordination grant formula, often requiring county boards to subsidize the state's maintenance of effort requirements in this area with local dollars raised from property tax payers.

For this reason, county boards and the families we serve strongly support the inclusion of the Department of Children and Youth's request for increased Part C Early Intervention funding in Governor DeWine's proposed budget. The request allocates \$7.2 million in SFY 2026 and \$9 million in SFY 2027 to support Evaluation and Assessment function. This funding—representing a 30.9% increase in the first fiscal year and an additional 6.8% increase in the second—will allow county boards to redirect local resources toward providing direct services to more infants and toddlers with developmental delays during their critical years of growth.

Another growing challenge for county boards is the rising number of referral requests to support multi-system youth. A 2023 survey conducted by the Ohio Association of County Boards of DD found that more than 1,500 children eligible for county board services were actively engaged with other local agencies, such as the behavioral health, addiction services, juvenile courts, child protective services, and family and children first councils. This has highlighted inconsistencies in statewide collaboration and shared funding across local entities.

County boards of DD support the Department of Children and Youth's budget request of a \$21 million increase to support Early Childhood Education in SFY 2026. In addition, we support DCY's proposed \$30 million in biennial funding for the development of regional wellness campuses. These investments will strengthen coordination among local entities, improve services for children in foster care with developmental or behavioral challenges, and expand opportunities for counties not currently serving this population.

In closing, please know that county boards of DD are committed to ensuring that children with developmental disabilities and multi-system youth receive the critical services and supports they need. We appreciate Governor DeWine, Director Wente and the General Assembly's continued investment in these essential programs and look forward to working with you to ensure that Ohio's most vulnerable children have access to the resources and care they deserve. Thank you for your time and consideration and I would be happy to answer any questions.