



House Children and Human Services Committee

Interested Party Testimony HB 96, SFY26/27 Biennial Budget

February 27, 2025

Jennifer Ellis-Brunn, Licking County JFS Director

“Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony today regarding House Bill 96. My name is Jennifer Ellis-Brunn. I am the director of Licking County Job and Family Services and I am here to provide testimony on behalf of the Ohio JFS Directors’ Association, the association representing county JFS departments in 88 counties.

County departments of job and family services (CDJFS) blend administration of multiple health, human service, and workforce programs. One in four Ohioans receive assistance from a local office at any point in time. The CDJFS is responsible for administering programs for the state’s most economically vulnerable citizens, individuals disconnected from the workforce, and individuals in need of protective services. Services operated through local agencies include food assistance, childcare, Medicaid (including long-term care, children’s health insurance and services to aged, blind and disabled), cash assistance and related work requirements, child protective services including foster care and adoption, adult protective services, workforce programming, and child support programs. It is the county’s primary duty to ensure clients receive the needed services for which they qualify, as well as ensure program integrity. In every interaction, we work to identify individuals who are ready and able to take the next step in moving up the economic mobility ladder on their journey to self-sufficiency.

I would like to draw your attention to three topics that are integral to the efficient and effective administration of Ohio’s JFS system:

County JFS departments have lost purchasing power to invest in front-line operations.

Allocations have been largely flat funded for over a decade, even as costs have dramatically increased. JFS departments often struggle with staffing levels operating below the needs of their communities. Investments are needed to ensure counties can recruit and retain a well-trained workforce that can ensure individuals and families are efficiently connected to programs, including employment and training programs.

Ohio’s local program support appropriations are the backbone of county operations, providing core funding for the local SNAP and Medicaid programs. These allocations, along with a portion of the county TANF allocation, primarily fund front line eligibility work impacting customers. This includes eligibility determination, quality assurance reviews, fraud investigations, information verification and transportation. Resources in these line items help stabilize families across the spectrum of JFS programs including child protection and workforce development and enable the state to draw down additional federal match.

- Since 2014, due to flat funding and inflation, counties have lost over \$25M per year of state GRF in core operation purchasing power.
- Looking even further back to pre-recession cuts, counties will receive \$43M less per SFY than they did in 2008 – without adjusting for inflation.
- The recession forced counties to pivot from individualized case management to transactional work to meet basic mandates when doing eligibility for public assistance. Even after that loss, flat funding has meant purchasing power of this transactional work has declined.
- Along with eligibility work requiring millions of eligibility redeterminations and new applications each year, county staff are also working to process millions of system-generated alerts and reported changes (including income) to ensure those who are on benefits are indeed eligible. For example, Licking County received 7,132 alerts in November, 7,925 in December, and 5,773 in January.
- We appreciate the continuation of funding for Medicaid administration and \$5M in performance incentives that will be made available to counties for meeting certain benchmarks. We have an amendment request that would put timeliness standards around sharing incentive criteria and distributing funds to ensure counties understand when and how to earn incentives before the quarter starts. Additionally, timely distribution of payment will ensure counties know how much overtime they can fund to meet performance requirements. In the current underfunded and understaffed environment, overtime is a standard practice to serve our communities.

Address the workforce shortage in critical jobs by mitigating the benefit cliff and ensuring people take the next step in their career.

Maintain and expand the Benefit Bridge Pilot program. The original Benefit Bridge program currently exists in 12 counties throughout the state. The program is appropriately funded for the current participating counties and is yielding promising results in helping individuals to take the next step to self-sufficiency by stabilizing them in jobs that pay a living wage. We appreciate the leadership of Representatives Click and Jarrells in starting this program. A recent graduate of Licking County’s Benefit Bridge was a single mother of two receiving food assistance, child care, and Medicaid. She is now off all public benefits and has earned her bachelor’s degree in surgical technology. She has paid down \$4,000 in debt, built a savings of \$2,300, and increased her credit score over 42 points.

SNAP Employment and Training Program. A funding increase is needed for the already existing but woefully underfunded and federally mandated SNAP Employment and Training Program. Counties receive \$3.4M of federal funds statewide and have access to draw down an additional \$4.3M reimbursement in federal matching funds if they can identify local match to provide up-front cash. There are also funds available for participant allowances of \$4.7M. Per the last biennial budget, a redesigned SNAP E&T program is in its infancy. The redesign is incredibly positive, and a relatively small additional investment will help ensure its success. There is an intense desire in the counties to enhance work and training programs, but minimal resources to do this work. With a goal participation of 52 individuals, Licking County is currently serving 58 and doing intensive case management that is transformative rather than transactional.

- A dedicated state GRF line item with an additional \$10 million should be created to indicate the level of resources counties have to help unemployed and under-employed SNAP recipients in achieving long-term employment and self-sufficiency. These are largely the same individuals who will become subject to the Medicaid work requirement. This appropriation will help maximize the state’s use of federal matching funds.
- We also support additional investment in the child support program. Overall, funding for county child support enforcement agencies has been stagnant for over a decade. Case complexity continues to increase, as has the level of effort and engagement necessary to ensure kids receive the support they need.

Other critical investments in the Introduced version of the budget that we support include:

- An if-needed appropriation for counties to handle eligibility determination and other administration of an approved 1115 demonstration waiver to implement a Medicaid work requirement for the expansion population. We believe a technical amendment is prudent to allow for funding if needed to administer other federal changes that would require additional duties at the county level, such as a federally created nationwide Medicaid work requirement.
- Maintaining current funding levels in the TANF spending plan for county allocations, although we are concerned about the number of earmarks in the Governor’s proposed budget and the increasing reliance on TANF to fund child care services. TANF allocations fund critical programming at the local level, including:
 - Prevention, Retention and Contingency programs to help ensure individuals can be stabilized in employment to avoid reliance on ongoing public assistance. Services range from car repair to emergency utility or rent payments, needed work supplies such as work boots or required tools, to contracts with local non-profits to enhance their stabilization programs. PRC also funds needed school clothing, coats, boots and shoes. There is data correlation showing a positive impact of this program on school attendance. Many counties also rely on TANF to fund stabilization services for the neediest of families in their communities – those at risk of involvement, or already involved with, children services. After the loss of kinship funding, Licking County utilizes TANF dollars to support kinship placements in areas such as child care to ensure children have the most stable out-of-home placement with the least trauma impact.
 - The Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program (CCMEP) program blends a portion of TANF with the WIOA youth program to provide personalized services and case management to youth between the ages of 16-24. During the 2024 summer program, 12 Licking County youth participated in a cohort through the Manufacturing Employment Program. Several students went

on to apprenticeships with IBEW and others went into paid work experience with Hendrickson Axle or achieved employment on their own.

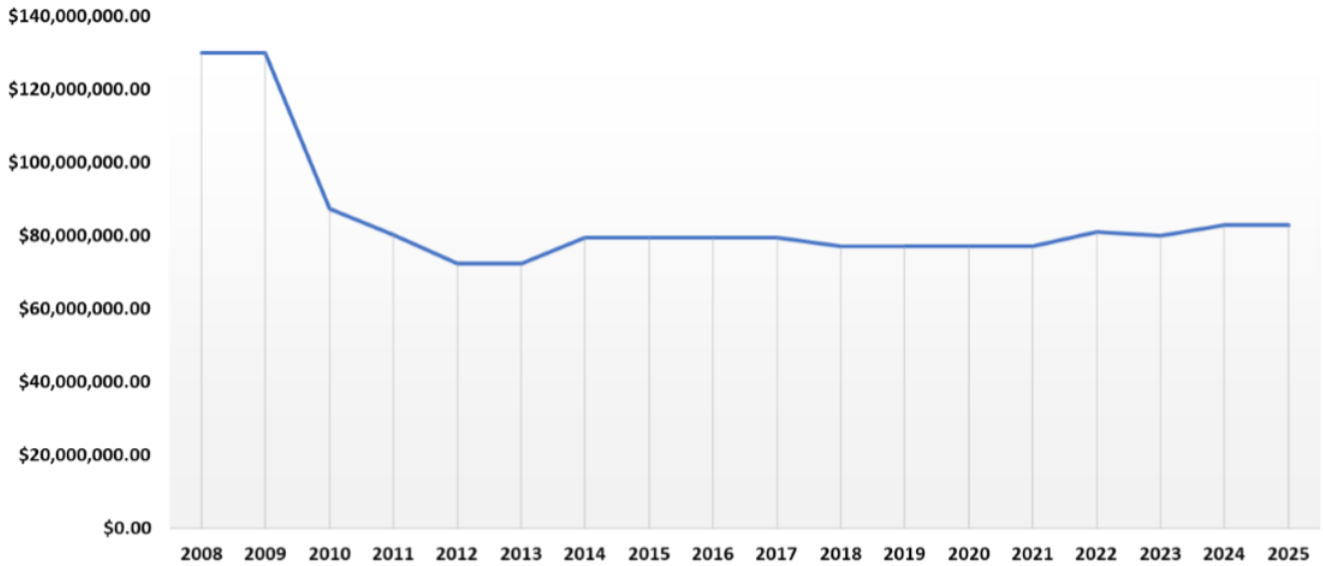
- Maintaining a \$9.72M/SFY appropriation for adult protective services (APS). County JFS departments are responsible for administering APS programs. This line item funds the response to reports of alleged elder abuse, neglect and exploitation. County APS staff ensure these allegations are promptly investigated and work to connect victims to protective services. Counties coordinate these efforts with courts, prosecutors, financial institutions, the aging network, hospitals, and other members of the community involved in serving this population.
 - A side note for your awareness: the social services block grant, a federal block grant, is a significant funder of child and adult protective services in the counties. Counties receive \$34M per year of these funds to invest in protective services programs.
- Children services-related investments in the state child protection allocation, wellness campuses, multi-system youth, and best practices, as highlighted by the panel today focusing on these issues.
- An increase in publicly funded child care eligibility up to 160% of the FPL, and continuing the child care voucher program for families up to 200% of the FPL, provided that a sustainable source of long-term funding is identified. Publicly funded child care is a critical work support for the families we serve. And ensuring providers can focus on care and not paperwork will mean children are more prepared to succeed in school.

Thank you for your leadership and support on these issues. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

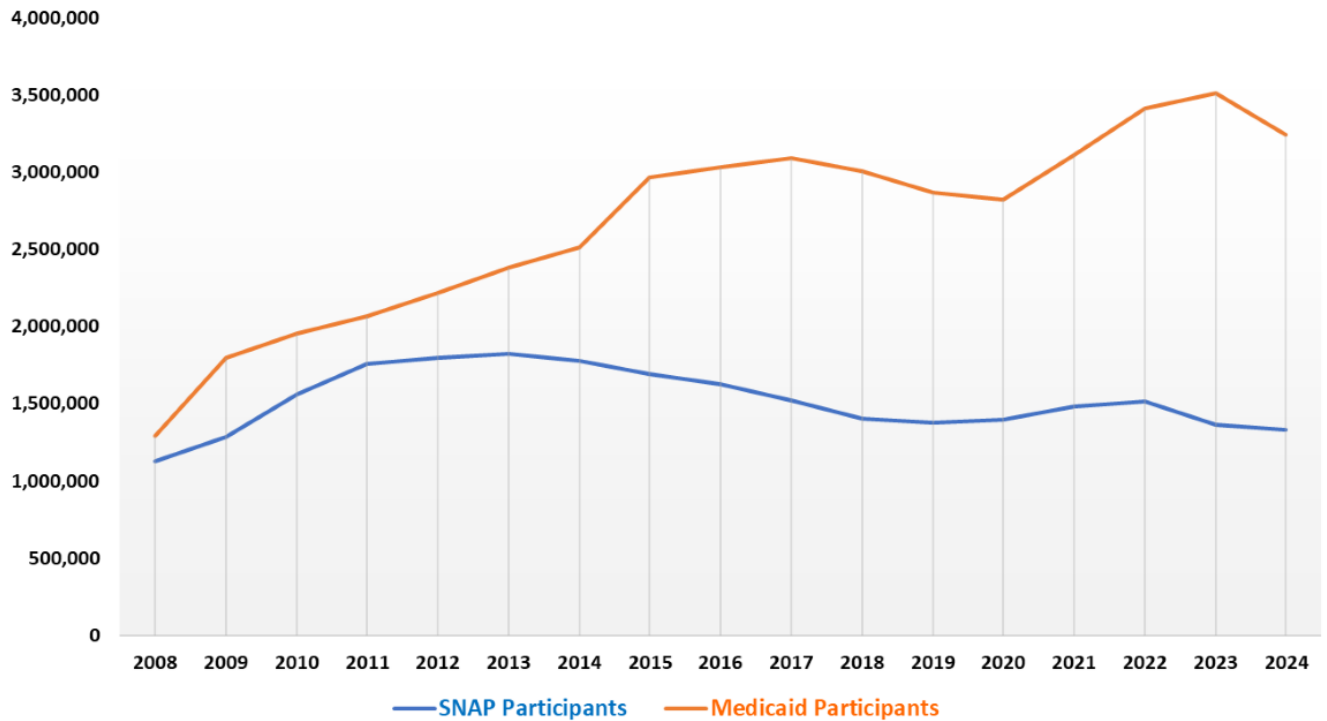
APPENDIX

Core Funding For Ohio County JFS Operations

ODM line item 655522 combined with a portion of ODJFS line item 600521



Snap and Medicaid Participants



*Averages compiled from ODJFS Public Assistance Monthly Statistics Reports and ODM Caseload Reports