



**Shawna Rohrman**  
**Cuyahoga County Office of Early Childhood**

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**Ohio House of Representatives**  
**House Children and Human Services Committee**  
**House Bill 96**

Chairperson White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the as-introduced version of House Bill 96, the FY 2026-2027 state operating budget.

My name is Shawna Rohrman, and I am the Director of the Cuyahoga County Office of Early Childhood and of our public/private partnership, Invest in Children. Our mission is to leverage the public and private sectors to coordinate, support, and prioritize a strong network of programs and services to benefit young children and their families. Through our work, we see the significant impact of public investments on the lives of our youngest community members, and the return on those investments down the road. We, like Governor DeWine, want Ohio to be the best place to have a child and raise a family. Yet, we hear the concerns from parents and caregivers about meeting basic needs and having adequate child care so they can work to support their families; concerns from our early childhood partners about being able to support the varied needs of families; concerns from our community about infant mortality. We urge you to support key provisions in HB96 that address these concerns and will continue our state on the course to being the best place to raise a family.

First, we ask you to support Ohio's working families and reduce child poverty through the state Child Tax Credit. Families are struggling to provide basic necessities, especially in the wake of inflation. In a recent report by Groundwork Ohio, one-third of parents with young children reported having serious trouble paying their rent or mortgage. That, of course, is on top of the costs of child care, healthcare, and other expenses essential to raising healthy and thriving children. This \$1,000 refundable tax credit would have a meaningful impact on working families with young children, helping to alleviate the financial stress they face in the critical early years of their child's life.

Second, we ask that you expand access to affordable, quality child care by increasing initial eligibility for publicly funded child care from 145% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to 160% FPL, maintaining the Child Care Choice Voucher for families earning 161-200% FPL, and capping family co-payments at 7% of household income. Child care access is a basic social determinant of work, with cost being the largest barrier. If parents cannot find affordable child care, they cannot reliably show up to work. Recent surveys in Ohio showed that nearly half of parents turned down a job offer, one-third quit their job due to inadequate child care, and nearly two-thirds of mothers with young children would return to work if they had access to affordable, quality child care. Expanding eligibility and lowering co-pays will provide thousands more families the ability to enter, re-enter, or stay in Ohio's workforce and contribute to the health of Ohio's economy.

Third, we ask you to increase state investments in Early Intervention services (Part C) by \$18M

across the biennium, as included in Governor DeWine's proposed budget. These funds will ensure a fully functional Early Intervention system and expand services to an additional 1,100 children across Ohio. Early Intervention (EI) is a crucial part of our early childhood and broader education systems. With this program, young children with developmental delays are supported alongside their parents and caregivers with targeted services aimed to help children hone skills and reach their full potential. EI services help prepare children for school and are shown to reduce the need for specialized services when they enter kindergarten. These funds will also ensure timely evaluations, assessments, and service coordination. The initial evaluation and assessment process is the key first step in determine which EI services a child needs, but is significantly underfunded. The lack of financial resources for evaluation and assessment creates challenges at the local level, adding strain to implementers of EI as they must identify other methods of evaluation and assessment to ensure they are able to properly serve children in the EI system. By supporting this funding increase, the state is making a critical investment in a system that significantly contributes to children's long term educational success.

Fourth, we ask that you increase state investments in programs supporting maternal and infant vitality: an additional \$37M to expand the Family Connects home visiting model statewide and \$16M to scale and support the Cradle Cincinnati model. Cuyahoga County has both Black and overall infant mortality rates that are among the highest in the state, and well behind recognized public health goals for reduction in infant deaths. The leading causes of infant mortality are prematurity, arising from stress and other deleterious biological and environmental factors in the prenatal period, and sleep related death, typically arising from an unsafe sleep environment. Infant mortality collaboratives like Cradle Cincinnati support programming prenatally and postpartum, educating and providing important resources to reduce prenatal stress and ensure both mom and baby are healthy throughout the perinatal period, while Family Connects offers a home visit by a registered nurse in the critical period after the child's birth, enabling a holistic assessment of the mother and newborn to identify and immediately refer for any concerns. The investments in Family Connects and Cradle Cincinnati are complementary, and each program will be key to reducing the number of infant deaths in Ohio.

These policies will not only help children thrive but also boost Ohio's workforce and economy. I urge you to fully fund these initiatives to ensure every child gets the best start in life.

Thank you for your time and commitment to Ohio's children and families. Please let me know if you have any questions or need of additional information.

**Follow-up contact information:**

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