



House Children and Human Services Committee

Interested Party Testimony HB 96, SFY26/27 Biennial Budget

March 4, 2025

Roxane Somerlot, Marion County JFS Director

Chairwoman White, Vice-Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee, thank you for the invitation to provide interested party testimony today regarding House Bill 96, focusing on areas related to workforce. My name is Roxane Somerlot. I am the director of the Marion County Department of Job and Family Services, and I am here to provide testimony on behalf of the Ohio JFS Directors' Association, the association representing county Job and Family Service departments in 88 counties.

County department of job and family services (CDJFS) agencies blend the administration of multiple health, human service, and workforce programs. One in four Ohioans receive assistance from a local office at any point in time. Services operated through local agencies include determining eligibility for means-tested programs including cash assistance, food assistance, childcare, and Medicaid (including long-term care, children's health insurance and aged, blind and disabled). Counties also operate employment and training programs including work requirements for cash assistance, SNAP employment and training, and other workforce programs, adoption, adult protective services, child protective services, foster care, childcare licensing inspections, refugee services, and child support programs.

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. And once someone has taken that next step, we work with partners to help ensure they are stable and able to keep that job or succeed in that training program.

In Marion County, the JFS is the umbrella for public assistance, workforce development, and child support enforcement. While my county children services agency operates separately and reports to a children services board rather than the

board of county commissioners, we collaborate closely to ensure we are serving families holistically.

Our county-led structure and holistic management across programs enables us to first, serve the whole family. And second, work with our local partners in an efficient and productive way that lets them focus on the work they do and the people they serve and lets us, in the bureaucracy, identify ways to help support their work of our shared clients.

The focus of this hearing is workforce programs. You may have already heard about the Benefit Bridge. Marion County is excited to be onboarding into the Benefit Bridge pilot program and we see a lot of promise in it. The Benefit Bridge will expand the continuum of services we have available to support people on their journey to family sustaining employment. We anticipate that our established relationships with employers will dovetail with the Benefit Bridge program elements to advance both the business and its employees.

Other workforce-related initiatives I would like to highlight, I'll group by population.

Stabilizing Individuals in the Workforce

TANF Supports and PRC

We leverage the county TANF allocation in variety of ways in Marion County to stabilize people in the workforce.

PRC: One of our pinnacle efforts is the county Prevention, Retention and Contingency, or PRC program. Every county has its own PRC plan. In Marion County we continuously scan our local environment to make sure our PRC plan is reflective of community needs with the goal of personal and economic development. Our plan prioritizes supports which allow people to obtain and keep employment. Services range from car repair, fuel assistance, emergency utility or rent payments, short term training, needed work supplies for a new job (like work boots), to contracts with local non-profits to enhance their stabilization programs. In the past two years we have developed a PRC program to specifically assist kinship caregivers (many of whom are working) stabilize and grow their financial condition while supporting an expanded family.

Our agency contracts with a local nonprofit to fund programming in financial literacy and guided decision making using the Bridges Out of Poverty model and the “Getting Ahead in a Just Getting by World”.

Employers

Our OMJ Center is significantly connected to our employer community, and we invest local WIOA and TANF funds to support the priorities of our businesses. These funds support services like recruitment, applicant screening, business-led customized training, HR benchmarking, retention initiatives and economic development resources.

Employer Resource Network

In partnership with the Marion Chamber of Commerce, Marion Community Foundation, and Ohio Health we invest county funds alongside our community partners to provide an employee retention service, available for employers to buy into. When employees who are recently elevated off of assistance, or maybe still in receipt of public assistance, face a hurdle, it too often can lead to loss of a job. The ERN works to provide a confidential resource for employees who face a set-back, and identify ways for the employee to first, communicate with their employer, and second, troubleshoot ways to address the problem. A Success Coach assigned to the employer is available on-site and via phone to navigate and arrange resources to address situational problems involving childcare, transportation, housing, family violence, etc.

Business Retention & Expansion (BRE) Sessions

Marion County’s OMJ staff is included in all Business Retention and Expansion meetings with area businesses. These sessions are coordinated by our economic development organization (Marion CANDO!) in conjunction with OneColumbus. BRE meetings with company leadership enable us to learn about both challenges and opportunities being experienced by the business. Our focus is to identify ways in which we can resolve and/or support employers through our combined array of services and connections with local and state resources. We are on track to meet with 40 businesses this calendar year.

Economic Development Activities

As economies grow, income tends to rise for everyone including the poor. Additionally, sourcing and developing talent is a key component of economic

development. Therefore, our OMJ Center works in tandem with local development and planning professionals to prepare our community to attract growth opportunities. This takes the form of labor market analysis and helping to sponsor and staff community projects such as our 2024 Summit on Housing, JobsOhio Site Authentication Conference, and “Why Marion?” (a high school logistics presentation to the Marion Area Chamber and Rotary).

Childcare

Childcare is one of the most critical supports to ensure parents can find a job and keep a job. The policy proposals to expand eligibility both regularly and through the voucher programs will enable parents to not have to worry about childcare as they look for and accept jobs. As Ohio simultaneously works toward continuing to implement federal requirements around quality, enrollment, and payments, it’s important that we don’t lose sight of the families being served by the publicly funded childcare program. They are the population who is working, but not at a high enough wage to enable them to be self-sufficient. Ensuring they can access publicly funded childcare is a critical way to support work.

Locally, Marion JFS is part of a community-wide task force working to strengthen childcare accessibility. Our collective work has resulted in expanded school-age childcare options, and we are expecting two new centers to open in 2025.

Dislocated workers:

Our JFS, serving as the OhioMeansJobs center, can assist dislocated workers in several ways:

WIOA: With Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act funds, we can connect individuals to training, and we can partner with employers to offer On the Job Training funds to support their hiring and training of individuals without the necessary skillsets for jobs they are otherwise suited for.

Rapid Response: In partnership with the state, we can work with employers and their employees in the event of a layoff or shutdown. We appreciate the state’s work to revitalize Rapid Response protocols and find having a local “one-stop shop” where individuals can apply for assistance to help meet short-term needs while also working to update resumes and find out about other employment opportunities an effective model.

Unemployment Claimants: While we don't administer Unemployment at the local level, we still see a lot of claimants looking for help when they are unable to get what they need on the phone or online. While we don't have funding for this, it's paramount we do what we can to assist people in getting their needs met. And I am happy to hear about the plans to update the UI system, as it's greatly needed.

In-School and Out-of-School Youth

Students enrolled in high school and post-secondary education – also our future and sometimes current workforce – can be served or connected to us in a variety of ways.

CCMEP: The Comprehensive Case Management and Employment Program, CCMEP, can provide person-centered plans and services, and a partner for the enrollee in their case manager who is there as a service coordinator, cheerleader, guide and support, for youth between the ages of 16-24. This program aims to blend TANF and WIOA in doing so. It can provide services to both in-school and out-of-school youth.

TANF Summer Youth program: This allocation provided to county JFS departments provides career development for youth and funding to provide a summer work program for youth who could use assistance finding job experience, but don't find a more robust case management program to be necessary for them or their circumstances. This program is focused on youth enrolled in high school and provides not only supported job experience but also development of "soft skills", financial literacy, working in teams, seeking/taking direction, and much more.

Partnerships with Schools: Marion JFS is a charter member of the Marion Area Workforce Acceleration Collaborative (MAWAC). This group includes educational leadership from all K-12 schools, Tri-Rivers Career Center, Marion Technical College, and the Ohio State University-Marion. Core members also include our Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development organization and most importantly, local businesses. We meet monthly at a different company location to design and activate collaborative approaches to integrate business priorities with the educational experience for the purpose of creating pipelines post-graduation.

Our OMJ staff also help educate K-12 teachers through a "Teacher's Boot Camp" each summer. The camp connects teachers with local businesses and supports them in creating curricula based upon their experiences with demand occupations.

SNAP Employment and Training: Lastly, I'll mention counties are currently in the process of implementing a redesign of the SNAP Employment and Training program. While redesign is incredibly positive, 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.

We are requesting a dedicated state GRF line item with an additional \$10 million be created to indicate the level of resources counties have to help unemployed and under-employed SNAP recipients find and keep a suitable job or confidently take the next step on their career path. These are largely the same individuals who will become subject to a Medicaid work requirement. This appropriation will help maximize the state's use of federal matching funds.

Ohio - both through state-led efforts such as CCMEP, Benefit Bridge and Child Care as well as county-led efforts through the county service delivery system – has made great strides in ensuring individuals who wish to stay in school, enter the workforce, or undertake a new career path, have access to stabilizing services and investments in their future. The policy proposals in the proposed budget will help further our state in these efforts. I do encourage the legislature to ensure that sustainable funding can be identified for these critical investments. The last thing I want to see is one valuable work support pitted against another. We have seen that these investments truly do pay off, especially when looking long-term at the value of keeping parents in the workforce and students engaged and successful in school.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.