



***Interested Party Testimony***

***Jewish Family Service Association***

***Laura Dales, Executive Director of Caring at Home, Home Care***

***March 5, 2025***

Good afternoon, Chair White, Vice-Chair Salvo and Ranking Member Lett, and members of the committee,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak today. My name is Laura Dales and I am the Executive Director of Caring at Home at JFSA Cleveland; Caring at Home is the home care agency of JFSA. It is an honor for me to be representing JFSA and its clients here today.

I'd like to start by telling you a bit about myself before sharing more about JFSA and the struggles our home care agency, and hundreds across the state, are experiencing in the midst of stagnant reimbursement rates, increasing expenses, staffing shortages, and inadequate training.

At the age of 16, I was hired for my first job in a retirement community. I quickly fell in love and have remained in the industry since, in a variety of capacities, working with and advocating for seniors. In the last eight years, I have earned my MBA at Baldwin Wallace as well as multiple certifications, including as a certified executive of assisted living, a certified executive of home care and hospice, and an end-of-life doula. I have two children, am active in my community, co-own a manufacturing company with my husband, and am part of the sandwich generation, supporting two aging parents who chose to remain at home in addition to my other responsibilities.

Since 2018, I have been working at JFSA. For those of you who aren't familiar, JFSA is a non-profit health care and service agency celebrating its 150<sup>th</sup> year of caring for and working with a variety of vulnerable adults, including the elderly, the developmentally disabled, individuals with mental illness, and domestic violence victims. At JFSA, we work tirelessly to help individuals and families find solutions to face life's challenges with confidence. As the Executive Director of Caring at Home, I am responsible for home and community-based services including personal care aides, skilled medical and clinical services. 600 of our clients are Holocaust Survivors, 80% of whom receive personal care services from Medicaid. In 2024, JFSA delivered 300,000 home health aide



hours, conducted 10,000 nursing and therapy visits, delivered over 22,000 nutritious meals, and supported 400 clients with monthly emergency response systems. And this is just a small portion of the services JFSA provides as we also operate 62 group homes, an intermediate care facility and a shelter for battered women, among other programs.

In 2021, I stood before the House Finance Committee to testify about the negative impact budget decisions made in this very Statehouse were having on JFSA and, more importantly, its clients. It would bring me great joy to share with you that our situation dramatically improved after long overdue increases in reimbursement were realized 2 years ago but, sadly, I am back, four years later, sharing a similar story. While the increases were extremely helpful, the repeated and ongoing failure of Ohio's representatives to properly fund home and community-based services with regular rate increases is creating an environment where agencies like JFSA cannot continue to support the state's most vulnerable, frail, disabled and elderly. Simply put, JFSA cannot afford to staff state-funded Medicaid clients and our staff cannot afford to work for them without regular and appropriate increases in reimbursement.

To help you better understand how precarious the situation is, I'd like to share some statistics with you. In 2010, 70.3% of JFSA's home care hours were Medicaid-funded and we operated with 0.64% overtime. By 2020, we strategically reduced our Medicaid footprint to around 40% of our home care hours. In order to survive, we were forced to continue exiting Medicaid cases, an exercise we halted with the increases realized two years ago. Currently, 12.7% of our home care hours are Medicaid funded, and overtime is consistently at 25%. Since the pandemic, we remain 70 full-time equivalents short of the necessary staff to fully meet client demand.

Over the past 10 years, the base wage associated with the home care worker increased dramatically, by a far greater percentage than the Medicaid increase we received two years ago. In less than five years' time, the annual salary associated with a registered nurse has increased substantially, largely driven by a shortage of nurses and pandemic burnout. For example, a starting nurse with no experience commands up to \$110,000 per year. Despite intense recruiting efforts, we have had two open nursing positions for almost one year and have experienced a net gain of 1 home health aide who meets state established criteria. Our ability to develop and train the workforce to state standards is limited by time and expense; a training program as being proposed by the Aging Services Workforce Amendment would enhance our ability to attract and retain workers, deliver more services, increase quality and reduce overtime.



In closing, I would like to reiterate that with the controlled exit of Medicaid cases and long overdue increases in reimbursement, our situation is much improved from what it was in 2020. However, our struggle is far from over and the lack of appropriately adjusted rates is a huge contributing factor. Waiting lists for services are long, the area offices on aging are struggling to keep up, Waiver coordinators are unable to find providers, our vulnerable populations are suffering, and providers are shutting their doors. Home and community-based care remains the preferred alternative for older adults and, in most instances, increases quality, improves client outcomes, and reduces expensive medical facilitation in a hospital or nursing home thus reducing taxpayer expense. Continuing to undermine and dismantle this system of care will lead to devastating outcomes in each of these areas; the State needs to regularly re-evaluate and make appropriate cost of living adjustments to Medicaid reimbursement as it did two years ago.

Thank you.