

Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to share briefly about the impact the Healthier Buckeye Grant has had on the residents of Marion and our workforce.

United Way of North Central Ohio in partnership with us at Marion Matters was awarded \$170,882 to help start a pilot program in our area called the Employer Resource Network. The funding was only needed in this case as start-up costs to a self-sustaining program. After almost nine years, I am happy to report that the funds received through the Healthier Buckeye Grant were the launching point we need as a small agency to initiate changes in how we support employees in the workforce.

Marion Matters, Inc. was the brainchild of Judge Thersea Ballinger back in 2011. She had attended a training about Bridges Out of Poverty and immediately brought the education back to Marion and used it in her court room. The

education and tools she learned were so impactful, she along with the help of others created a 501c3 known as Marion Matters. For the past two years, I have had the privilege to be the executive director of this transformational agency. Before I became the director, I was the coordinator for the ERN program helping to secure businesses for our network that Marion Matters was working on developing with the pilot money from the Healthier Buckeye Grant. When I started in 2019, just two years after the launch of the program, I had four businesses in Marion in contract for ERN services. Today, I am excited to share that we have 20 businesses in 6 counties in our ERN and because of its success we have partnered with the Clearwater Council of Government to expand services into more COG regions which will support employees who are caring for one of our most vulnerable populations – Developmental Disabilities.

You might be wondering how all this ties together. Gene spoke about the Bridges Out of Poverty work that is being taught throughout our country and the world to equip people with tools to stabilize and break the cycle of generational poverty. Marion Matters is one of those agencies. We took that education and partnered with another organization called Employer Resource Network USA, to learn the business model and how to help businesses retain their employees. We have molded the two concepts together and are not only teaching Bridges Out of Poverty principles for the general community, but with our business contracts, we have the opportunity to equip and coach people where they are – at work.

This education and access to employees has been a home run regarding helping and training people who otherwise would have never reached out to a “community helps agency”.

Since the start of the ERN program in 2017, we have helped over 2,000 people with barriers that may have resulted in losing or quitting their job. When working with employees, the coaches are equipped with the Bridges Out Poverty knowledge and tools to help people out of crisis and move into a place of stabilization.

Marion Matters would be in favor of supporting a renewal of funding from the Healthier Buckeye Grant to support programs like ours that create lasting change. Our programs are not designed to be a handout but a hand up.

The ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed) data from United Way shows that 48% of Marion County is living on a survival budget or at and below the poverty line. We have many people in our communities who are struggling. We believe that government funded programming is an aid but not meant to be fully relied on. Our

education and support include budgeting and helping people become self-sufficient.

We are thankful for the pilot money we were awarded to start our ERN program at Marion Matters and hope to have access to an additional funding opportunity again.