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Jennifer Meek Eells, Executive Director



Ohio House Finance Committee

Hearing on House Bill 96 (State Budget)

Interested Party - Testimony of The Ohio Workforce Association

March 10, 2025

Chair Stewart, Vice-Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Rose Sweeney, members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer written testimony as an interested party on HB 96. We submit this testimony on behalf of the Ohio Workforce Association (OWA) membership.

On behalf of the Ohio Workforce Association (OWA), I am writing to express our strong support for the GRIT Project (Growing Rural Independence Together) and to respectfully request full funding to ensure its continuation and expansion throughout Ohio's 32 Appalachian counties and other rural communities. GRIT funding is included in House Bill 96 under the oversight of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services.

The GRIT Project has been instrumental in addressing workforce development challenges unique to our rural regions. Through targeted assessments, coaching, and professional development, GRIT provides critical support to high school students, adults, and professionals, equipping them with the skills and confidence needed to succeed in today's evolving job market. By fostering accountability and self-reliance, this initiative not only prepares individuals for sustainable careers but also strengthens our rural economies and communities.

Increased funding is essential due to:

- Pent-up and new demand: Current funding has been exhausted, preventing support for both youth and adults in this biennium.
- Nine school districts on the waiting list for next year.
- Thirty percent of schools were not approached due to funding limitations.
- Growing demand for adult workforce development, particularly in recovery and reentry communities.
- The need to scale successful pilot programs that enhance credentialing, post-secondary education access, and employment opportunities for youth and special populations.

To meet these needs, GRIT Project proposes the following expansions:

- Expanding the Career Navigator program from 28 to 82 Appalachian school districts in the next biennium.
- Increasing the Recovery/Reentry Workforce Support Specialist role from 8 to 24 counties.

- Doubling participation in the High School Seniors Without a Plan Career Credentialing Program from 250 to 500 students.
- Expanding the HealthCorp WELLth Building pilot, focused on wellness and workforce development, from 8 to 50 schools in Appalachian health deserts.
- Increasing adult training funds to close gaps not covered by other sources, supporting the expansion of programs such as the Electrical Training Academy.

Sustained funding for the GRIT Project will allow for boarding of these essential services, providing career navigation, skill development, and workforce readiness programs to more individuals. This investment in Ohio's workforce will drive long-term economic growth, create employment opportunities, and ensure a stronger future for our rural communities.

We urge you to prioritize full funding for the GRIT Project to maintain and expand these transformative programs. Thank you for your time and consideration. We appreciate your leadership and commitment to advancing Ohio's workforce development efforts.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jennifer M. Meek Eells". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jennifer" being the most prominent.

Jennifer M. Meek Eells, Executive Director
Ohio Workforce Association