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**Ohio House of Representatives Finance Committee
Interested Party Testimony – House Bill 96
David Painter, Clermont County Commissioner and CCAO President**

Chairman Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the state operating budget, House Bill 96. My name is David Painter, I serve as Clermont County Commissioner and am the President of the County Commissioners Association of Ohio.

Counties are responsible for delivering state services and programs at the local level. Recently, counties have experienced an increase in the cost required to effectively deliver these services due to workforce shortages and inflation. It is vital that House Bill 96 continues to support a strong state-county partnership, which will allow counties to serve Ohioans effectively.

CCAO has five priorities for this operating budget:

- pursuing reforms and robust funding of the indigent defense system,
- strengthening the Next Generation 9-1-1 system,
- continuing the state-county partnership on county jail projects,
- bolstering the child welfare system, and
- improving access to child care.

We appreciate Governor DeWine's proposed investments in these key areas and look forward to working with the General Assembly to strengthen the state-county partnership.

Indigent Defense

Indigent defense has been a longstanding concern for counties. As stewards of the county general fund, commissioners are required to expend taxpayer money for a constitutionally mandated service through a system that leaves the commissioners with little control. Furthermore, the system as a whole has been historically underfunded and prior to the DeWine Administration, the majority of the costs of the system fell on the county. However, the DeWine Administration and the General Assembly have increased the funding to this



system over the last several years, and counties are grateful for that investment. We believe this budget presents an opportunity to continue to support the financial investment in indigent defense, while beginning to look at meaningful reforms and efficiencies in the system.

One of the main cost drivers for indigent defense in counties is the lack of attorneys, especially in the rural areas of the state. We are pleased to see the current version of HB 96 contains language and funding for a new pilot program that we believe will provide high quality service and hopefully lead to system efficiencies. The Northwest Regional Hub in HB 96, would allow the Ohio Public Defender (OPD) to directly administer the indigent defense system for Allen, Hardin, and Putnam counties. OPD will operate an office with public defender attorneys and work with county judges to coordinate appointed counsel across three counties. CCAO is excited for this pilot program and believes it will provide a model for future counties to follow if they choose.

Unfortunately, the governor's proposed budget did not include additional funding for county reimbursement. At the current level of funding in the governor's budget, OPD estimates that counties will receive reimbursement at 70% to 75% over the biennium. **CCAO is asking that the House provide additional funding of \$40 million in SFY 2026 and \$53 million in SFY 2027 (HC-1087).** The additional funding would bring the projected reimbursement rate to approximately 90%. This appropriation increase is supported by the Indigent Defense Working Group, comprised of OPD, CCAO, the State Bar Association, the Ohio Judicial Conference, the Ohio Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, and the Ohio Association for Justice.

Next Generation 9-1-1

Last budget, Ohio began the process of upgrading our outdated 9-1-1 system to a Next Generation 9-1-1 system (NG 9-1-1). The NG 9-1-1 system makes numerous improvements to the state's 9-1-1 system and implements lifesaving technology that benefit the citizens of Ohio. As of today, eight counties are currently piloting the system and three more counties are expected to come online in the coming weeks.

In the last budget, you took the brave step to increase the universal access fee from \$0.25 per month to \$0.40 per month. The fee changes were expected to generate \$100 million per year and provide additional financial support to counties to support their system upgrades and operation. However, the fee is currently bringing in around \$50 million a year. The revenue shortfall threatens the statewide implementation of Next Gen 9-1-1 and forces counties to rely on property tax levies and other sources of local funding to operate the NG 9-1-1 system.

CCAO asks you to make another brave decision this budget and increase the fee again by \$0.60 per month to \$1.00 per month to ensure that counties have the funding needed to operate this life-saving technology (HC-0401).

County Jails

The state and counties have enjoyed a strong partnership on funding for jail construction and renovation projects since 2018. State funding in addition to county dollars allowed many counties to build or significantly renovate their jail. Many of the jails in the state were built during the last sustained funding partnership between the state and counties in the 1990s to early 2000s. Present day, many of those same facilities are coming up on their expected end of life and will need to be replaced, so both the funding in HB 96 and the timing are crucial.

CCAO supports the current allocation of adult-use marijuana tax revenue for county jails in HB 96. We are pleased to see an allocation of 25% of revenue without a cap on funding, and the creation of a long-term funding partnership with the state on this important issue. The Office of Budget and Management estimates the proposal will allocate about \$159 million over the biennium to county jail projects and the funding will be distributed via a grant process administered by the Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (DRC).

CCAO and the Buckeye Sheriff's Association (BSSA) recently updated a 2019 survey on necessary jail projects in the state. The survey showed that counties are looking at jail projects that focus on increasing female bed space, increasing mental health and substance abuse treatment space, and enhancing safety for both staff and inmates. Unfortunately, the survey also showed that counties are experiencing an approximate 41.5% increase in cost from the initial bid to the current bid on jail projects, which prices many counties out of jail projects absent state support. **Therefore, it is important to maintain the current funding and grant program in HB 96 to further solidify the state-county partnership in this area.**

Child Welfare System

Earlier this week, this Committee heard from Ross County Commissioner Jack Everson on the impact of the statewide child welfare placement crisis on counties and children throughout the state. The cost of placement between 2020 and 2024 increased by 68%, while the number of children in paid placements decreased by 9%. This cost curve is unsustainable and places great strain on county budgets.

CCAO asks for your support of the funding included in House Bill 96 for the State Child Protection Allocation, which will help counties respond to the steep increases we are facing. The bill also proposes policy changes to provide transparency in provider rates through a Department of Children and Youth process, which is a positive step in providing more predictability in our budgeting. We support this multipronged approach to addressing this crisis.

The budget includes funding for regional child wellness campuses, which would provide short-term crisis stabilization services for youth with complex needs and provide the counties with additional information and time to secure the best placement option. **CCAO strongly supports this investment to better serve our children.**

Child Care

Counties are committed to fostering self-sufficient, healthy families through programs provided by our job and family services (JFS) agencies, including administering the state's publicly funded child care system. As such, counties are uniquely positioned to recognize both the current challenges many families have accessing child care and the positive impact that child care can have on a family's journey toward economic prosperity.

CCAO supports the proposal to increase the eligibility of publicly funded child care to 160% of the federal poverty level in House Bill 96, and the continuation of the Child Care Choice Voucher Program for families up to 200% of the federal poverty level. Removing this barrier will provide better outcomes for working families, businesses, and the overall economy. Additionally, CCAO supports efforts to build child care capacity to address the unique needs of infants, toddlers and children.

Chairman Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, the budget proposed to you by Governor DeWine is a strong local government budget. You have the opportunity to make it an even stronger local government budget with some targeted investments. My fellow county commissioners, executives, and council members are eager to work with you to build upon the strong foundation that Governor DeWine and his administration proposed.

Thank you for your time today. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.