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House Bill 96 Interested Party Testimony
House Finance Committee
Kathleen McGarvey, Vice-Chair
Alliance of Ohio Legal Aids
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Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and Members of the Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony on House Bill 96. My name is Kate McGarvey, and I am the Executive Director of Legal Aid of Southeast and Central Ohio. I also have the honor of working with my Legal Aid Society colleagues and serve as Vice Chair of our membership organization, the Alliance of Ohio Legal Aids (Alliance).

The Alliance of Ohio Legal Aids is a collaboration among Ohio's regional nonprofit Legal Aid Societies. Collectively, we serve every county in Ohio. We provide high quality free civil legal assistance to low-income Ohioans. You can see the list of our members as part of this testimony.

Unlike in the criminal justice system, there is no right to an attorney in civil cases. Yet the civil justice system can provide the key for families to access housing, health, safety, and economic security. Civil legal aid is a combination of services and resources that helps Ohioans of all backgrounds—including those who face the toughest legal challenges: children, veterans, seniors, and victims of domestic violence—to effectively navigate the justice system.

In 2023, Alliance members served nearly 136,000 Ohioans including 59,000 children, 18,000 seniors, and 3,700 veterans. We helped 2,700 Ohioans seal or expunge their criminal records and 765 Ohioans reinstate driver's licenses, removing barriers to employment. We helped nearly 5,000 domestic violence survivors achieve safety and helped thousands of Ohioans with housing stability through eviction and foreclosure assistance.

Addressing civil legal issues can be life changing. For low-income Ohioans like Bernard McAllister (name changed to protect client privacy) the economic security can be lost if they don't legally own

their home. Mr. McAllister, a proud veteran, lived in his family home for many years and wanted to maintain and update it. He sought help from legal aid when he learned that, despite his father willing the house to him and his siblings, he couldn't qualify for a home weatherization program because he didn't own the home.

With the full support of his siblings, legal aid helped Mr. McAllister accomplish all the legal work necessary to transfer the deed to his name. Legally securing his family home not only gave Mr. McAllister stability and peace of mind, but it also enabled him to access the weatherization program, which will help him improve the home's energy efficiency, reduce his energy costs, and create an even more valuable asset for him to be able to share with future generations.

That is just one example of legal aid's far-reaching impact. However, the need is always greater than resources—legal aid turns away approximately one out of every two requests. The budget of each legal aid firm includes federal resources, interest on attorney trust accounts, some revenue from court filing fees, foundation grants, and individual fundraising. I am here today to ask you to further invest in our work.

Currently, Ohio is at the bottom when compared to general revenue investments made in surrounding states and far less than state leaders like Texas and Virginia. While we are grateful for every dollar we receive, we currently receive just \$1 million annually in general revenue funding and the use of these funds is restricted to veterans and individuals with legal issues arising from substance use disorders.

We ask that you please support an amendment that would appropriate \$10 million to support legal aid services in every part of the state. These funds will help Legal Aid continue to provide critical services to your constituents and address specific community needs.

Low-income Ohioans like Mr. McAllister count on our services to provide stability to their families and we are counting on you to help us provide those services to your constituents.

Thank you for the opportunity to share information about our life-changing work and I would be happy to answer any questions.