

**Ohio House Finance Committee Hearing**  
**Interested Party Testimony from United Way of Greater Cleveland on House Bill 96**  
**Submitted March 10, 2025**

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Good morning Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and other distinguished members of the Ohio House of Representatives. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on House Bill 96.

United Way of Greater Cleveland manages the 211 program for Cuyahoga, Geauga, and Ross counties. Our program is a nationally recognized leader because of its robust program model and database which includes 1,600 agencies with over 11,000 services. Trained navigators are available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year and receive requests from callers, access the database of resources, match the callers' needs to available resources, and link or refer them directly to an agency that can help. Some services people are connected to include employment, food, housing, and utility assistance, mental health counseling, drug and alcohol treatment, legal assistance, veteran's services, tax preparation, and health care.

I am here today to urge you to include in House Bill 96 \$2,000,000 (Amendment HC0524-1) in support for Ohio 211. We are one of fourteen organizations within Ohio 211, and in 2024 alone, Ohio 211 served over 821,000 individuals with multiple and intersecting needs. Ohio 211 serves more people than neighboring states with similar populations including Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Illinois. Moreover, Ohio 211 has over 89,000 services in its database, the second largest number of services in its 211 database after California. The top needs from Ohio callers in 2024 were food, followed by housing, and utilities.

We applaud the House Finance Committee and Governor DeWine for including robust investments into Ohio's children and health and human service system in House Bill 96, such as the development of a refundable child tax credit, maintaining investments into publicly funded childcare, investing in Ohio's workforce, and prioritizing health and behavioral health services. An investment in Ohio 211 makes these essential programs work for Ohio residents, communities and our government, such as the Ohio Department of Children and Youth, in three important ways.

**1. Connecting People to Vital Services in Real Time:**

The needs of Ohioans are multidimensional and intersecting. The delivery system that exists to meet these needs is complex and difficult to navigate, particularly in a crisis or during natural disasters. For example, a parent who recently lost a job may need emergency food, a utility payment plan, and skilling up for a new job, each of which has unique requirements with different access points. 211 helps community members quickly navigate those systems through an easy number. Ohio 211 network covers most of the state and is available to anyone seeking help free of charge 24/7/365. Because Ohio 211 is the largest provider of information and referral services in Ohio, it is an excellent channel for Ohio governmental and other organizations to connect vital programs and services to people that urgently need them.

## **2. Data Trends:**

Not only do we connect people to needed services, but we watch the data trends to better respond to urgent needs, and work to eliminate the causes and further crises. Last year alone, United Way of Greater Cleveland's 211 program responded by:

- Saving callers over \$1.2 million in prescription drug costs, which helped people get the prescriptions they need to maintain their health at an affordable price and avoid more costly healthcare interventions due to lack of access to prescription drugs.
- Connecting over 16,000 residents to utility assistance programs, which kept people safe and in their homes.
- Connecting over 16,000 individuals to food assistance programs, which helped families and individuals stay healthy and nourished.
- Serving over 3,400 veterans and connecting them to employment, counseling, and VA benefits.

Moreover, we have used our data and 211 program to make the social service system more efficient. Starting in 2023, United Way partnered with FrontLine and the Cuyahoga County Office of Homeless Services to pilot a more efficient emergency shelter solution. A dedicated team of United Way 211 Housing Specialists live answer calls to the shelter intake and triage callers. Those that are eligible for emergency shelters are warm transferred to Frontline, and ineligible callers are provided alternative housing resources. During the pilot, incoming call volume to Frontline decreased by up to 53 percent. United Way's services allowed Frontline staff to better serve those who were truly in need of emergency shelter services, while still ensuring individuals that needed alternative services were getting connected to appropriate community resources through 211.

In addition, United Way partnered with CHN Housing Partners and Step Forward in 2023, with funding from the Ohio Department of Development, to pilot a more efficient solution to address utility assistance calls. A dedicated team of United Way 211 Utility Specialists live answers calls to the utility line and triages callers. Eligible callers are assisted with appointments, and 211 escalates calls that require connection with CHN and Step Forward, allowing them to focus on high need cases. This collaboration increased customer satisfaction and efficiency in access to services.

## **3. Greater Effectiveness and Efficiency of the 211 Network and Government:**

Having a shared funding source through annual, ongoing state funding would expand Ohio 211's services statewide, make the community service ecosystem more efficient, facilitate more complex care coordination, and build capacity for Ohio 211 to partner with the state on its initiatives. This includes increasing workforce participation, bridging individuals from receiving public benefits to working in stable employment, and connecting families to essential community resources.

Moreover, 211 saves lives and state funds. When people are connected to care at the onset of a crisis, they can recover quickly and become more self-sufficient. Neighboring states have invested annual state funds into 211 including Indiana, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. We are asking the same of Ohio. In addition, Ohio is one of three states in the US that does not have full 211 coverage for its entire population.

We greatly support the administration and legislature's goals and dedication to Ohio's thriving economy and creating a vibrant future for all Ohioans, including meaningful investments into

economic development, workforce development, higher education, and children. Ohio's financial security and overall economy is dependent on community members getting access to workforce and community services when they need them, so they quickly bounce back and become more self-sufficient. A \$2,000,000 state investment into Ohio's 211 network would promote and support the state government's workforce, community, and economic development goals.



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