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Testimony on SFY 26/27 Operating Budget
House Finance Committee

Chairman Stewart, Vice-Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and esteemed committee members, thank you for opportunity to submit written testimony on HB96.

My name is Renee Stein, and I am the Senior Director of MarCom & Business Development at I Am Boundless Inc. I also am a parent of a person with a disability, and my family member receives Home and Community Based (HCBS) services through one of Ohio's Developmental Disabilities waivers. I'm here to talk about why it's important to keep investing in these services and the people who provide them.

On behalf of myself and family members across the state, we have been tremendously grateful for the generous investment the General Assembly made in our industry via the last state budget.

Before you increased funding in the last budget, it was hard to find people to help my family. When we received my son's diagnosis, the outlook was bleak. His treatment team gingerly explained that he will likely not be able to communicate very well, will not hold a job, never get married and may not be able to live with us as he will likely need round-the-clock care.

It was devastating and life-altering news. This information has impacted every decision in my life, my husband's life, and my daughter's life. Our family needed to approach every decision through a different lens—every wedding, every job offer, and even trips to the grocery store became both a challenge and a goal to work towards. I share this not looking for sympathy but to share the reality many parents like me face. We don't begrudge the situation we are in; we do it with love, and we give everything we can. But we cannot do it alone.

I launched myself into research, spoke to specialists, and spent hours on the phone with MANY agencies seeking as much early intervention as possible. We were dedicated to finding the right mix of treatment and support to allow our child to fulfill his potential. We were very fortunate with medical and school support, and our son thrives. His progress was incremental and subtle, but with the continued support, he lived at home, attended school trips, and even started an internship opportunity. I am exceptionally proud.

Once my son aged out of school services, he was offered to turn his internship into a part-time employment opportunity. Even with an understanding employer, I could not accommodate supporting him in taking this opportunity. Before the increase in funding, we were not able to find providers. My husband would take as much time off work as possible, but it was not workable. Since you have increased the funding, things have gotten better. We have a wonderful caregiver for our son who supports his growth. These changes have made a real difference in our lives. Thank you for taking action to fix this problem. My son is so proud to be moving towards independence, and with continued support, he can continue to defy the outlook we heard almost two decades ago. The impact was so significant that when it was time to move away from my corporate career, I chose to bring my skill and dedication to a nonprofit that serves individuals with IDD/BH Challenges. I want to, in some way, contribute to another family's story of beating the odds. I now see on a larger scale how hard DSPs work and those small incremental changes that uplift families like ours every day.

While there has been a true stabilization of HCBS Waiver services, I am concerned that there is no current long-term solution in place for sustainable Waiver funding. The Governor's proposed budget doesn't include a method to ensure wages keep pace with rising costs of living for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) working in waiver settings. If you don't act, the workers who provide these services won't get the support they need for years. This means we could end up with the same crisis we just solved. We can't let that happen again.

Prior to the increase, our family had worked with at least four other agencies and independent providers that had dropped him based on lack of sustainability. They just could not afford to provide him with the level of care he needed based on the wages they could provide. Each time this happens; we lose momentum and the gains slow down. Our family will miss more work and our son's opportunities shrink.

To ensure we avoid these crisis scenarios, it is imperative that we work to determine a long-term funding solution that regularly adjusts rates for the critical services Waiver funds.

These services are essential for people like my son. We need to make sure people with disabilities always get the support they need.

Thank you all for your time today.

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