



**Interested Party Testimony- House Finance Committee  
HB 96 — FY26-27 State Operating Budget  
March 13, 2025**

Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney and members of House Finance Committee — Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on House Bill 96 in support of the United Way Collaborative's funding request which would appropriate **\$2M per fiscal year through the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce Program and Project Support line for the United Way Collaborative**

I am Tracey Ballas, Chief Executive Officer of United Way of Muskingum, Perry, and Morgan Counties. It has been an honor working alongside not just Dr. Courtice and Kerry on this initiative but all the leaders of the United Ways in the Collaborative.

Given our long-term investment in education, United Way is well positioned to bring our communities together to work to address the issues that lead to low academic achievement. Each United Way has the local leadership and infrastructure necessary to mobilize community leaders, service providers, school districts and other resources to improve literacy in Ohio's youngest readers. To do this, the United Way Collaborative is working to expand, replicate, scale and/or enhance programs and strategies that are making the greatest impact on the lives of the Ohioans who are experiencing the lasting effects of the pandemic and related economic uncertainties, including children, working families and other residents. **We are uniquely suited to lead on and succeed in this area.** Our results from the last biennium show our great impact and the need for continued services.

In the counties my local United Way serves, more than 40% of households are low-income or asset limited, around 50% of students are not ready to enter kindergarten, and more than 20% of children are food insecure. We are all interconnected and interdependent. Rather than helping one person at a time, we focus on transforming systems to benefit everyone. This is the essence of Community Impact. Guided by this philosophy, United Way of Muskingum, Perry, and Morgan Counties has set goals with measurable outcomes in the areas of income, education, and health.

With funding from the state, our School Supplies for Success program collaborated with local school districts to provide school supplies and resources to facilitate learning for more than 4,200 students. We made investments into Imagination Library to allow nearly 6,000 children under 5 to receive books.

The need remains urgent. While we are seeing progress, far too many families continue to live in poverty, too many children enter kindergarten unprepared, and too many go hungry and lack basic needs. We cannot afford to stop now. It is our responsibility to leverage our expertise and resources to build a more educated, healthy, and sustainable community. Our children are our future, and without family stability and access to food, they cannot learn. Without the necessary school supplies, they cannot succeed. If they aren't ready for kindergarten or reading proficiently by 3rd grade, their likelihood of relying on public assistance or becoming involved in the criminal justice system rises significantly. We must invest in our children now to ensure a brighter future for all.

The funding from the last biennium has generated impactful results. We are eager to receive ongoing support to expand on this success and continue making valuable strides in improving our communities.

I kindly ask for your support for our funding request.

Thank you,

Tracey Ballas  
Chief Executive Officer  
United Way of Muskingum, Perry, and Morgan Counties