



## **Testimony of Amy Pulles**

**President and CEO – Prevent Blindness, Ohio Affiliate**

***HB 96 – State Operating Budget***

**House Finance Committee**

**April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024**

Chairwoman Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding House Bill 96, the State Operating Budget. My name is Amy Pulles and I am the President and CEO of Prevent Blindness Ohio. My comments today will focus specifically on provisions related to the Ohio Department of Health (ODH).

For more than six decades, Prevent Blindness Ohio (PBO) has been Ohio's leading charity focused solely on preventing blindness and preserving sight. PBO serves direct services to approximately one million Ohioans annually in all 88 counties through a variety of programs, public health initiatives and educational programs. We have partnered with ODH and other state agencies on several initiatives over the past few decades to fulfill our shared goal of vision health and preservation. PBO is one of four nonprofit organizations that receive support from the Children's Save Our Sight Fund, which is administered by the Ohio Department of Health. The Children's Save Our Sight Program is funded by voluntary contributions made by Ohioans when they register or renew a motor vehicle. We also partner with the Ohio Department of Aging to facilitate the Ohio Aging Eye Public-Private Partnership. PBO is very proud of our partnership with the State of Ohio and are committed to doing all that we can to save the sight of all Ohioans.

Governor DeWine's budget proposal for Fiscal Years 2026 and 2027 includes a new and significant investment in children's vision, dubbed the *OhioSEE* program. During his State of the State Address last year, Governor DeWine announced the formation of a Children's Vision Health Strike Force to address access issues for children who fail a state-mandated vision screening. I was proud to serve on the Strike Force Committee, which met several times last summer to discuss this important work. The Ohio Student Eye Exam Program (OhioSEE) is the result of the Strike Force's efforts and represents an unprecedented \$40 million investment in children's vision.

In Ohio, school-aged children are required to receive a vision screening every other year beginning in kindergarten. In Ohio, we have an exceptionally high screening rate and virtually every child receives these important screenings. In fact, vision screening is one area where PBO is laser focused. You will recall that we are one of the grant recipients for the Children's Save Our Sight Fund; we use that grant to train child vision screeners and provide the necessary equipment for them at no cost. The majority of vision screenings in Ohio are performed by PBO-trained screeners using equipment that we provide.

While most students pass their vision screening, some will fail and need a comprehensive eye exam and possibly corrective lenses. The challenge is most children who fail a vision screening are not able to access these services. This is where the Strike Force was focused and where OhioSEE will have an extraordinary impact. Funding appropriated in HB 96 will be used primarily as grants to support local efforts to connect children with comprehensive eye exams and, if needed, corrective eyewear. There are several successful models across the state, so we do not need to reinvent the wheel; we just need to make sure families in every corner of the state can utilize eye care.

Given PBO's core mission and focus, we are unlikely to be a grant recipient under OhioSEE, however as the leading entity for vision screening and an advocate for children's vision, we feel this program is vital to the health and success of Ohio's children. I would note that PBO does connect families with eye care services through our charitable network and that more than 90% of children who fail a vision screening and are referred to PBO are connected with services from providers who have donated time and resources to us.

In addition to OhioSEE, we have a related ask that would support our work in the vision screening space as well as the work of other groups under the Save Our Sight Fund. The Save Our Sight Fund was established in 1998 and has existed unchanged since then. As noted previously, Ohioans have the opportunity to make a voluntary contribution when registering or renewing a motor vehicle registration. ODH provides four equal grants annually to support the work of PBO and other grantees. In addition to our vision screener training, funds support the Ohio Amblyope Registry, K-12 education programming offered by the Ohio Optometric Association, and protective sports eyewear offered by the Ohio Ophthalmological Society.

The Save Our Sight Fund is 100% utilized for service delivery with no costs being passed on to end users. Children are the beneficiaries of these investments, and we feel the OhioSEE program complements this work very well. In the previous budget (HB 33, 135<sup>th</sup>), PBO worked to expand the voluntary checkoff concept to state-issued occupational licenses. Our goal was to increase funding for the first time since the inception of SOS to address both inflationary pressures and the growing need for these services. The Ohio House of Representatives added this amendment into the budget, however it was removed in the Ohio Senate. At the time, we were seeking a new checkoff on all occupational licenses and the feeling among some lawmakers was that was too broad of an ask.

Therefore, we are proposing an amendment to HB 96 that would add a voluntary Save Our Sight Fund checkoff to licenses issued by six licensure boards and state agencies whose licensees have a strong interest in children's eye health and safety. This approach addresses concerns raised in the prior budget while still allowing for revenue to be generated in a voluntary fashion. Specifically, we are asking for the following licensure agencies to inquire with their licensees about an optional donation to the SOS fund: State Medical Board of Ohio, Ohio Board of Nursing, State Vision Professionals Board, State Board of Education, State Pharmacy Board, and Ohio Division of EMS. We feel licensees of these boards will be very willing to make a voluntary contribution in support of Children's Save Our Sight Fund.

In closing, I want to express my gratitude for your service and attention to these important issues. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.