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Ohio House Finance Committee Hearing

Thursday, March 3

Interested Party Testimony

Ohio House Substitute Bill 96 – Make state operating appropriations for FY 2026-27

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Chair Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney, and distinguished members of the Ohio House Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide Interested Party testimony today on House Substitute Bill 96, the state operating budget for FY 2026-27.

My name is Erica Schnitz, and I serve as the Clinical Director for Huckleberry House, a central Ohio nonprofit organization supporting young people ages 12 - 24 struggling with homelessness, family conflict, poverty, and violence. We provide a continuum of services, including operating a Teen Crisis Program, to address the root issues that cause youth homelessness and help at-risk young people develop independent living skills to reach their full potential.

Huckleberry House is advocating for a budget allocation of \$729,000 (\$365,000 per biennium) – initially submitted to this committee as an amendment by Representative Jarrells – to support our crucial work. During a time of increased need and strained capacity, this funding would allow us to scale our Teen Crisis Program and Transitional Living Program operations to provide high-quality and high-return services to more youth across our state who are facing homelessness.

This budget investment would support the organization's tailored, one-on-one care with the youth we serve through our Teen Crisis and Transitional Living Programs, and it will provide a high return on investment for our state. Research demonstrates that investment in homelessness prevention programs reduces government spending across medical and behavioral health care systems, criminal and legal systems, and publicly funded wraparound services.

I completed my master's level field placement at Huckleberry House in 2016 and returned as a full-time staff member in 2017. Throughout my time at the organization, I have witnessed an increase in mental health needs across programming, but specifically in our Teen Crisis and Transitional Living Programs. Today, I am sharing a story to highlight the importance of the mental health support young people receive at Huckleberry House.

A young person moved into our Transitional Living Program. Upon move-in, they were employed and enrolled in school. As this young person's time in the program progressed, staff started observing changes in behaviors, including the youth not going to school or work; complaining about noise in the apartment; and, staying isolated from others. The therapist on this young person's team was able to meet with him and identify the early signs of psychosis, affecting his overall functioning and leading to the observed behaviors. The therapist was able to provide interventions to address and manage symptoms, and the case manager worked with the young person to connect with psychiatry for ongoing medication management. Between the services provided by our team and medication management, this young person was able to successfully move into fair market housing, return to school and full-time employment, and reduce symptoms that were impacting overall functioning.

Studies show that individuals are most likely to experience their first psychotic between their late teens and mid-twenties, which is the age range for majority of our young people. And while psychosis is not present for all young people in our programs, for the ones that are experiencing it, our wrap-around services allow for early intervention to address the symptoms and impact on functioning which helps set the young person up for continued success in our program and beyond.

As this Committee continues deliberations on the budget bill, we respectfully urge you to include our funding amendment for Huckleberry House. The state's investing in our organization will make a lasting impact on the lives of Ohio's youth and families, supporting our ability to scale operations of our Teen Crisis Program, which provides lifesaving support and transformative opportunities for youth in Ohio who are facing challenging circumstances, including homelessness.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions.

Erica Schnitz