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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

Lindsey Stephens

Crime Victim Services Coordinator / Parent Mentor

Huckleberry House

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 Lindsey Stephens, and I serve as the Crime Victim Services Coordinator and Parent Mentor 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 Transitional Living 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.

Our Transitional Living Program is essential for many young adults facing the world for the first time. Here at Huckleberry House, we do not see this as a last chance, but the first step to overcoming trauma and building an independent life. In our Crime Victim Services program, we see many young people escaping violence. Often they have young children. It is critical to stop the circle of violence and trauma for these youth and families. Our Crime Victim Services program educates the youth about healthy relationships and boundaries, while empowering them to confidently enter the adult world and feel safe. Their young children benefit from their parents taking education courses, getting back on track with their health appointments and education, and creating a positive environment in which their children can thrive.

In order to build the foundation needed for the future, it is crucial to be out of survival mode. Our Transitional Living Program focuses on mental health, independent living skills, healthy relationships, and job training skills. All of these goals are more successfully achieved by allowing temporary housing to pave the way for their next step into independent housing.

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.

Lindsey Stephens