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Ohio House Finance Committee Hearing

Thursday, March 3

Interested Party Testimony

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

Megan Koontz

Board Member

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 Megan Koontz, and I serve as Board Member 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 and 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 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 housing initiatives for young people ages 18-24 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 Program and housing initiatives for young people ages 18-24, 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 have been on the Huckleberry House Board of Directors for 10 years and have seen the direct impact our organization has in the community. During this time, I have had the privilege to serve on our Scholarship Committee and hear directly from the youth that Huckleberry House supports. These young adults have faced overwhelming challenges at such a young age, are now pursuing higher education and various Ohio colleges and universities, and are pursuing careers locally in healthcare, social work, real estate, criminology, and other fields. Intervening with, and supporting these youth through our Teen Crisis and Transitional Living Programs serving youth ages 12-24, ultimately strengthens our workforce which benefits Ohio as a whole. In these uncertain times, when our funding is significantly impacted, this state provided funding would allow us to continue our vital work.

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.

Megan Koontz