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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

Lynda Leclerc, LISW

Interim Executive Director

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 Lynda Leclerc, and I serve as the Interim Executive 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 Program and housing initiatives, 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 started my career at Huckleberry House 30 years ago as a counselor in the Teen Crisis Program. When I first began my work, the issues teens faced were often more traditional: family conflicts, academic pressure and peer dynamics. Over time, the scope of crisis has changed. Today, our teens face complex challenges that include mental health issues, homelessness, and risk of trafficking. Social media and technology have served to both connect and isolate today's teens, frequently leaving them vulnerable to the judgements of both friends and strangers. Family units are also experiencing complex needs. This is not only due to divorce and blended families, but also to extreme economic hardships, isolation from extended family networks; and, simply being ill equipped to handle the mental and emotional needs of their children.

Over a 4-month period, we had a 17-year old female youth enter the crisis program several times. She was experiencing housing instability, living in several different places - with her mom, her mom's boyfriend and her aunt. When her aunt lost her housing and moved in with a friend, the youth became homeless. She was couch surfing, but ran out of options.

The youth had children services involvement over the years, but she no longer had an active case. Although the family was engaged in her stay at Huckleberry House's Teen Crisis Shelter, they were unable to find housing that would allow the youth to stay with them. During her last stay in the Teen Crisis Program, she was old enough to enter our Transitional Living Program, and we transitioned her into an apartment. She is currently living with a roommate that was in a similar situation. The youth is working through her independent living skill curriculum and participating in counseling. She found part-time employment and is attending high school. Although living with a stable family in a home environment is ideal, this young person is making the most out of her opportunity and is learning new skills every day. She is working through her trauma and dealing with the feelings that come from her past and her present. She is learning to share space and her feelings, both indicators of significant growth. She is finding her place in the world and is working hard to define a future that she both desires and deserves.

Huckleberry House is the safety net for many youth and families, and often making the difference between families staying together or finding alternative solutions rather than entering the child welfare, juvenile justice, or court systems. We provide the youth and families in the community

with immediate support in a crisis, access to counseling and mental health services and emergency housing when needed. We help them learn the skills necessary to improve communication and build healthier relationships, which are essential to staying together and working toward a better future.

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.

Lynda Leclerc, LISW