

Testimony on HB 96 (FY26-27 State Budget)
by Adam Herman, Chief Executive Officer
Ohio Association of County Boards of DD
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Chairwoman Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani and members of the House Health Committee, on behalf of the Ohio Association of County Boards of Developmental Disabilities, I thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 96.

Founded by families nearly six decades ago, Ohio's 88 county boards of DD now provide a lifetime of services and supports for more than 107,000 people with developmental disabilities across the state. Representing the unique perspectives and beliefs of the individuals, families, and communities they serve, county boards have continually adapted to meet the ever-changing needs of our large and growing population. Ohio is a national leader in providing DD services due in large part to the long-term commitment and financial support of the communities we represent, and we are honored to join our colleagues here today building upon Ohio's legacy of success as we look toward the future.

When this coalition came before the General Assembly two years ago, our service delivery system was on the brink of collapse. DD providers across Ohio were unable to recruit and retain the direct support professionals (DSPs) who provide invaluable, life-altering support for people with disabilities and their families. DSPs were leaving our field at alarming rates to take jobs with more competitive wages in other sectors—like hospitality, fast food, and warehouse work—because they couldn't make ends meet on the wages our system could offer.

As we shared at that time, state funding for Medicaid waiver reimbursement rates had not meaningfully increased in more than a decade. Fortunately, the General Assembly answered our desperate call for action, and thanks to an historic investment of local, state, and federal funds in the last budget bill—a decision many of you here today supported with your vote, for which we are eternally grateful—our system has largely recovered and stabilized itself over the past 18 months.

Today, DD providers have substantially increased starting DSP wages to attract new caregivers to our system. They can now also competitively compensate their employees to keep them from leaving for better opportunities. In turn, people with disabilities and their families are now approaching the level of day-to-day stability, predictability, and freedom they need not just to survive, but thrive—allowing our system to achieve its core mission of supporting the individuals we serve in living happy, healthy, and fulfilling lives of their own choosing.

It is for this reason that county boards are deeply grateful to Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for maintaining the state's financial commitment to people with developmental disabilities and their families by using state GRF to fill the gap left by one-time federal funds that were used in the last budget to support our system's historic rate increase. We recognize that this represents a significant increase in state resources when many other program areas have been asked to cut back, making its inclusion that much more meaningful when viewed in the context of the entire state budget.

We also appreciate that the state is continuing to provide the resources necessary for people with DD who live in intermediate care facilities and state developmental centers to be successful by allocating modest funding increases for services delivered in non-community settings.

However, if history is any guide, Ohio's DD system will quickly be once again unable to meet the ever-growing needs of the individuals and families we support—both now and in the future—unless the State of Ohio can commit to periodic, incremental, state-funded increases for people with developmental disabilities receiving services through Medicaid waivers.

As you've heard my colleagues describe today, Ohio's DD coalition is proposing a modest, state-funded Medicaid reimbursement rate increase of 3.4% in FY 2026 and 2.3% in FY 2027. These incremental increases are designed to keep pace with the gradual but persistent growth in the cost of doing business that all organizations—regardless of size, geography, and funding source—experience year over year. County boards support these state-funded increases as proposed.

In the last budget, county boards of DD were proud to make a small but meaningful contribution of local property tax funds toward the state's rate increase—amounting to approximately 1 in 5 dollars of the total amount of matching funds required when all was said and done—which they hoped would help prevent the imminent collapse of services for tens of thousands of Ohioans. In light of how quickly people with developmental disabilities and their families have rebounded in the two years since, it is clear that this investment was money well spent.

However, after reviewing revised five-year cost projections that document both the rapidly growing costs of waiver services as well as the increased limitations of local county board property tax funding sources, we have concluded that the local funding county boards committed in the last budget toward the previous rate increase now represents the maximum amount of support that will be possible from local property tax payers moving forward on any proposed rate changes. As such, we support the coalition's proposal to use state funds for these proposed increases.

Shifting to other areas of the Executive Budget, county boards also support DODD's proposal to maintain flat-funding for line-item programs supporting Multi-System Youth, Technology First, and Employment First, all of which support the essential needs of our population while representing a high return on the state's investment.

In addition, county boards strongly support DODD's policy proposal to establish supported decision making as a less restrictive alternative to guardianship. Whereas guardianship prevents a person with a developmental disability from being able to make major decisions independently, supported decision making promotes autonomy and independence while ensuring continued support. Through supported decision making, more people with developmental disabilities will be able to make their own decisions regarding employment, finances, living arrangements and more. County boards strongly support making Ohio a state where everyone has the right to live a life of their own choosing.

In closing, county boards wish to once again thank all members of the General Assembly for their support for people with developmental disabilities in the last budget, and for your continuing support in the years to come.