



Testimony of Amy Pulles

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HB 96 – State Operating Budget

House Health Committee

March 5, 2025

Chairwoman Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding House Bill 96, the State Operating Budget. My name is Amy Pulles and I am the President and CEO of Prevent Blindness Ohio. My comments today will focus specifically on provisions related to the Ohio Department of Health (ODH).

Prevent Blindness Ohio (PBO) is Ohio's leading volunteer nonprofit public health organization dedicated to our mission of preventing blindness and preserving sight. We serve all 88 Ohio counties, providing direct services to one million Ohioans annually and educating millions about what they can do to protect and preserve their precious gift of sight. The programming emphasis of PBO includes eye health education, advocacy, and early disease identification for Ohioans at high-risk of losing their sight, including preschool and school age children.

PBO has partnered with ODH and other state agencies on several initiatives over the past few decades to fulfill our shared goal of vision health and preservation. PBO is one of four nonprofit organizations that receive support from the Children's Save Our Sight Fund, which is administered by ODH. The Children's Save Our Sight Program is funded by voluntary contributions made by Ohioans when they register or renew a motor vehicle. PBO is very proud of its partnership with ODH and are committed to doing all that we can to save the sight of all Ohioans.

Governor DeWine's budget proposal for Fiscal Years 2026 and 2027 includes a new and significant investment in children's vision, dubbed the *OhioSEE* program. During his State of the State Address last year, Governor DeWine announced the formation of a Children's Vision Strike Force to address access issues for children who do not pass a state-mandated vision screening. I was proud to serve on the Strike Force, which met

several times last summer to discuss this important work. The Ohio Student Eye Exam Program (OhioSEE) is the result of the Strike Force's efforts and represents an unprecedented \$40 million investment in children's vision.

In Ohio, school-aged children are required to receive a vision screening every other year beginning in kindergarten. Through the Save Our Sight Fund, PBO trains and certifies nurses and teachers as children's vision screeners and provides them with ODH approved vision screening equipment at no cost. Our partnership with ODH has resulted in a very strong and successful vision screening training program throughout Ohio that ensures completion of essential children's vision screenings most often by a PBO trained vision screener.

While Ohio benefits from a strong vision screening program, the challenge we face is ensuring that children who do not pass a vision screening receive the comprehensive eye exam and eyeglasses they need. This is where the Strike Force was focused and where OhioSEE will have an extraordinary impact on helping to provide access to these vision services. Funding appropriated in HB 96 will enable the OhioSEE Program to offer local schools four successful delivery model options to connect children with comprehensive eye exams and, if needed, corrective eyewear.

PBO shares the goals of the OhioSEE Program. Through our Vision Care Outreach Program, we provide access to free eye exams and eyeglasses to 1,000 uninsured/underinsured children each year and nearly 700,000 children each year receive a vision screening from a PBO certified vision screener. We are proud to say that 96% of children who fail a vision screening at school and are then referred to PBO for access to free vision care completes the cycle and receives an eye exam and glasses at no charge to their families.

PBO strongly supports the OhioSEE Program, which will have a positive impact on ensuring the vision care needs of children are met and that all children in Ohio will be able to see clearly.

In addition to OhioSEE, we have a related ask that would support our work in the children's vision screening space as well as the work of other groups under the Save Our Sight Fund.

The children's Save Our Sight Fund (SOS) was established in 1998 by the General Assembly to support the eye health and safety of children. As noted previously, Ohioans have the opportunity to make a voluntary contribution when registering or renewing a motor vehicle registration. ODH provides four equal grants annually to support the work of PBO and other grantees. In addition to our children's vision screener training, funds support the Ohio Amblyope Registry, K-12 education programming offered by the Ohio

Optometric Association, and protective sports eyewear offered by the Ohio Ophthalmological Society.

The Save Our Sight Fund is 100% utilized for service delivery with no costs being passed on to end users. In the previous budget (HB 33, 135th), PBO worked to expand the voluntary checkoff concept to state-issued occupational licenses. Our goal was to increase funding for the first time since the inception of SOS to address both inflationary pressures and the growing need for these services. The Ohio House of Representatives added this amendment into the budget, however it was removed in the Ohio Senate. At the time, we were seeking a new checkoff on all occupational licenses and the feeling among some lawmakers was that this was too broad of an ask.

Therefore, we are proposing an amendment to HB 96 that would add a voluntary Save Our Sight Fund checkoff to licenses issued by six licensure boards and state agencies whose licensees have a strong interest in children's eye health and safety. This approach addresses concerns raised in the prior budget while still allowing for revenue to be generated in a voluntary fashion. Specifically, we are asking for the following licensure agencies to inquire with their licensees about an optional donation to the SOS fund: State Medical Board of Ohio, Ohio Board of Nursing, State Vision Professionals Board, State Board of Education, State Pharmacy Board, and Ohio Division of EMS. We feel licensees of these boards will be very willing to make a voluntary contribution in support of Children's Save Our Sight Fund.

In closing, I want to express my gratitude for your service and attention to these important issues. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.