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Testimony of Marla Morse, Executive Director, Oral Health Ohio

Before the House Health Committee

March 5, 2025

Chair Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani and members of the House Health Committee, my name is Marla Morse, and I am the Executive Director of Oral Health Ohio, a coalition of statewide partners who advocate for and educate to improve the oral health of Ohioans. I am pleased to provide written proponent testimony on HB 96 (Operating Budget).

Oral Health Ohio strongly supports the proposed initiatives in the Executive Budget designed to improve oral health services statewide. These initiatives are essential for expanding access to dental care for underserved populations, particularly children, and promoting the overall well-being of our communities. This is especially critical given that tooth decay remains the leading unmet health need among children and low-income adults in Ohio.

#### Children's Dental Services

The allocation of \$3 million each fiscal year to support the Children's Dental Services Program will prioritize providing mobile and portable dental services to children in Ohio's most underserved counties: Clinton, Crawford, Gallia, Highland, Hocking, Monroe, Noble, Paulding, and Washington. These counties are designated as dental health professional shortage areas and lack a safety net dental clinic to serve the community's needs.

Underserved children suffer from alarmingly high rates of tooth decay, which can have lasting consequences. By delivering both preventive and restorative dental care through these models, we not only prevent tooth decay but also set the stage for better oral health throughout their lives. The economic toll of untreated tooth decay is significant, as seen in the increased use of emergency departments and the need for sedative dentistry in children who have lacked access to proper care. Addressing this issue now saves costs and improves long-term health outcomes.

#### Children's Access to Vision and Dental Services

For the reasons stated above, we support the provision allowing the Medicaid Director to transfer up to \$7 million each fiscal year to support public health programs, including up to \$2 million specifically for increasing children's access to dental care.

#### School-Based Health Centers

The proposed \$10 million per fiscal year for 23 new school-based health centers (SBHC) and expansion of services in 9 SBHCs is a vital investment in the health of Ohio's children. SBHCs are an evidence-based model that improves access to health care, including dental care, for children and adolescents.

SBHCs not only improve health outcomes but also supports academic performance by reducing absenteeism due to dental issues.

#### Ohio Primary Care Workforce Initiative

We strongly support an increase from \$5.4 million to \$7 million over the biennium for the Ohio Primary Care Workforce Initiative, which trains future healthcare providers in federally qualified health centers (FQHCs). FQHCs

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serve under resourced Ohioans and lead in integrating oral health into primary care, essential for early detection, prevention, and improved coordination between medical and dental providers in managing overall health.

Ohio State Dental Board

The proposed 14.5% increase in 2026 and 4% increase in 2027 for the Ohio State Dental Board is a positive step towards strengthening the regulatory framework governing dental practice in Ohio. These increases will enable the board to effectively oversee and support dental professionals, ensuring that they adhere to the highest standards of care.

Dentist and Dental Hygienist Loan Repayment

We fully endorse the allocation of \$270,000 per fiscal year for dentist loan repayment and \$100,000 per fiscal year for dental hygienist loan repayment. These incentives attract and retain dental professionals in underserved areas, where their services are greatly needed.

Oral Health Ohio believes that these budget initiatives represent a significant investment in the oral health of our state's residents. We urge the state legislature to approve these measures and continue to support efforts that prioritize oral health.

Thank you. If you have any questions, I can be reached at [marla.morse@oralhealthohio.org](mailto:marla.morse@oralhealthohio.org)

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marla Morse", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Marla Morse, MSW, MPA