



March 6, 2025

**Testimony on SFY 26/27 Operating Budget
House Health Committee**

Chairwoman Schmidt, Vice-Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani, and esteemed committee members:

My name is Paul J. Soprano, and I am the Director of OakLeaf Services at United Cerebral Palsy Association (UCP) of Greater Cleveland. We are headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio, and serve individuals with all types of disabilities, primarily in Cuyahoga, Lorain, and Medina Counties. We are a 75-year-old not-for-profit business that provides support for about 320 adults and 1,000 children with intellectual, developmental, and other types of disabilities annually. Our team of 175 employees are proud to provide essential services to Ohioans with disabilities.

I lead the largest division of UCP of Greater Cleveland, OakLeaf Services for adults. We serve people in two residential facilities as well as in day and employment services funded through the home and community-based waiver program administered by the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD).

Through our OakLeaf Partners division, we also are a long-term and trusted partner of Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD) offering vocational rehabilitation (VR) services to more than 150 Ohioans with disabilities last year leading to community employment and greater financial independence, community inclusion, and self-esteem for those we serve.

First, I want to express our deep gratitude for the investment in disability and vocational rehabilitation (VR) services in the last state budget. Your support allowed Ohioans with disabilities access and resources to find, keep and succeed at meaningful jobs in their communities. In 2024, we assisted 53 individuals with finding meaningful jobs allowing them to earn over \$800,000 in wages.

I respectfully submit this testimony in support of the budget initiatives proposed by Governor DeWine and Director Miller for Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD) as outlined in House Bill 96. These initiatives help ensure that all Ohioans have access to the resources and opportunities to be successful in the workforce and their chosen careers. The budget proposal also supports accessibility initiatives, internship opportunities, and state partnerships that help Ohioans with disabilities live, work and thrive in their communities.

I would like to share a brief story highlighting the impact OOD services have on Ohioans with disabilities.

LeafBridge: A Center of Excellence for Children

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Archie is a young man with a bright future and big goals! UCP first met Archie in 2013 when he participated in a computer skills training program. He then joined OakLeaf Partners' Group Employment site at the Cleveland Clinic's Employee Health Plan, where he worked for several years. During his time there, he honed his professional skills as he took on various tasks such as data entry, completing mailings, and creating new hire orientation packets, all while improving his soft skills and communication.

Ready to take the next step in his career, in 2021, Archie began Career Exploration with OakLeaf Partners and started working in the mailroom at the Cleveland Clinic. In this position, he further developed his skills, delivering inter-office mail and navigating throughout the many buildings on the campus. Archie excelled in this role, and his supervisor saw him as a great asset to the team.

In April 2024, a mailroom position opened at Exela Technologies, located within the Cleveland Clinic administrative offices in Independence, and Archie was encouraged to apply.

He was hired and, with the assistance of a job coach from OakLeaf Partners, funded through OOD, he familiarized himself with the new work environment and began to establish natural support systems. Archie enjoys his work at Exela and is well respected among his coworkers. OakLeaf support services check in occasionally and are proud to see what a valuable addition he is to the Exela team!

The budget initiatives for Ohioans with disabilities, guided by the leadership of Director Miller, will reinforce and strengthen the services provided by OakLeaf Partners at UCP of Greater Cleveland. We encourage this committee to support the OOD budget proposal as outlined in HB 96.

With your leadership, together we can ensure these services are available to the Ohioans that so greatly need them! Thank you again, for the opportunity and privilege to bring my testimony before you today.

Sincerely,

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