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Interested Party Testimony on House Bill 96
House Health Committee
March 6, 2025

Chair Schmidt, Ranking Member Somani, and members of the Ohio House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written-only interested party testimony in consideration of House Bill 96 (HB 96), the state operating budget. Disability Rights Ohio (DRO) is the state's protection and advocacy system that advocates for people with disabilities in Ohio. Our work includes advocating for people enrolled in the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD) Home and Community-based Waivers and receiving services through Ohio's vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency, Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD).

DRO applauds Governor DeWine for maintaining investments in the DODD proposed budget for direct care worker wages and OOD's budget to pull the entire federal match for vocational rehabilitation services. Direct care workers who provide services under DODD's over 40,000 administered waivers are a critical component to ensuring people with disabilities can live independently in their communities. Additionally, OOD provides services to over 42,000 Ohioans with disabilities with the goal of helping individuals obtain and maintain employment.

DRO would like to highlight three (3) provisions within Governor DeWine's Department of Developmental Disabilities and Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities Agency budgets proposal:

- 1. Maintaining the increase in funding for direct care worker wages;**
- 2. Direct care worker wages data collection and establishing a Task Force; and**
- 3. Maintaining the full federal match for vocational rehabilitation services**

DIRECT CARE WORKER WAGES

In the previous budget, the Ohio General Assembly increased funding to provider rates with the goal of increasing direct care worker wages. The aim was to bring wages from around \$12 an hour to \$18 an hour for Medicaid and Aging waivers and \$19 for Developmental Disability waivers. This increase was a necessary step to ensuring wages for this essential workforce could be competitive with competing jobs in the labor market. DRO applauds Governor DeWine for maintaining these increases in HB 96. Direct care workers are a critical component to the home and community-based service system and maintaining this increases ensures access to this workforce for people with disabilities.

DIRECT CARE WORKER WAGES DATA COLLECTION AND TASK FORCE

HB 96 includes language that would collect data from providers regarding the wages paid to direct care worker wages and to submit an annual report on the data to the Governor. This is a great step in accountability for the increase the legislature provided in the previous budget. However, the legislature can go further to ensure the additional funding provided is going to direct care workers and access is expanding. The legislature should consider including language that would establish a direct care workforce task force (Task Force).

The Task Force could be comprised of providers, advocates, and people with disabilities with the goal to study the implementation of direct care worker wages through the data gathered by the Ohio Department of Medicaid, survey gaps in services, and provide recommendations to ensure sustainability in wage growth and expanded access to home and community-based services. These recommendations could be provided to the Governor, Legislature, and the departments of Aging and Developmental Disabilities. Although the increase was much needed, sustainability and accountability are a needed next step to ensuring Ohio's home and community-based service system meets the needs of disabled Ohioans.

MAINTAINING FEDERAL MATCH FOR VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

DRO applauds Governor DeWine for maintaining the full federal match for VR services in Ohio. VR services are a key component to helping disabled Ohioans work in their community's ensuring independence. Prior to the last biennial budget, OOD was not pulling the full federal match for decades sending back potential federal dollars that could have been utilized for the provision of VR services. Since the last budget, the agency has indicated services have expanded and wages have increased. Increasing funding for these services have been needed and maintaining the funding included in the proposed budget is a great step to continuing the increased access and wage growth by those receiving VR services.

HB 96 continues the investments the legislature made in House Bill 33 in the 135th General Assembly. These investments were long overdue and have helped to expand access to VR services and ensure independence in disabled Ohioans homes and communities. DRO applauds Governor DeWine for these continued investments and for this legislature for listening to disabled Ohioans in the previous budget to make these investments.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this written-only interested party testimony for HB 96. If you have any questions or wish to discuss these issues further, do not hesitate to reach out to Jordan Ballinger, Policy Director at jballinger@disabilityrightsohio.org or (614) 466-7264 x135.