

**House Health Committee
House Bill 96
Friendship Circle of Cleveland
Rabbi Yossi Marozov, Executive Director
Jeremy Ginsberg, Parent
Izabella Bashkin, Student
March 6, 2025**

Chairman Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani, and members of the House Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Rabbi Yossi Marozov, and I am the Executive Director of Friendship Circle of Cleveland. I'm pleased to be here today to share with you the services Friendship Circle provides to children with disabilities and their families in Northeast Ohio.

The hardest thing in the world is to raise a child. But there is one thing harder: To raise a child with a disability, and even harder is to see your child lonely.

Mickey is an 11 year old boy with autism, who comes to Friendship Circle several times a week. His dad Kevin shared with me that before FC, he felt *he* needed to be Mickey's friend, because Mikey was all alone, all the time. Now, as Mickey is surrounded by so many friends, he can finally be his *dad*.

For twenty-two years, Friendship Circle has been a lifeline for families raising children with disabilities. Friendship Circle offers over 30 programs designed to foster social skills enrichment, provide essential family support, and inspire hundreds of teens to be friend-makers. Hundreds of families across Northeast Ohio, from Pepper Pike in Cuyahoga County to Avon in Lorain County and Mentor in Lake County, rely on Friendship Circle as their village, their community, their source of strength and respite.

Friendship Circle's unique model, pairing children with disabilities with teen volunteers, cultivates genuine friendships and breaks down barriers. It fosters a culture of inclusion, and kindness. Teens develop empathy for others (which is so desperately needed in today's world), and as these teens transition to adulthood, they will go forward with a greater compassion and understanding of the challenges so many families face which cannot always be seen, felt, or heard but is always carried on the shoulders of parents.

Since Fiscal Year 2024, with \$200,000 in annual funding from the State of Ohio, Friendship Circle has experienced tremendous growth. We have introduced 12 new programs for children and families with disabilities, expanded our team by six new members, and increased the number of child participants and teen volunteers by approximately one-third.

The mental health crisis is bad enough in our community. Giving respite to families, and a community that fosters networking and support is crucial.



The demand for our services continues to rise, as more families seek our support. Our current annual budget of \$2.1 million, primarily reliant on private donations and foundations, is stretched to its limits. **I respectfully request your support for a \$400,000 appropriation each fiscal year for Friendship Circle.** This funding will ensure we never turn away a child due to our load capacity and it will help us improve our programs to meet the diverse needs of our community for respite, social skills, family support, and teen's well-being.

Now, I'd like to introduce Jeremy Ginsberg, a Friendship Circle parent, to share his personal experience and the profound impact our programs have had on his family.

Chair Schmidt and members of the committee, my name is Jeremy Ginsberg, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My son Simon was diagnosed with Autism when he was 5. When Simon was 8, I was still trying to navigate the reality of becoming a single parent to Simon and his sister when my parents "suggested" we go to a barbecue that Friendship Circle was hosting to learn about their programs.

To say that day changed our lives is not hyperbole. For starters, I didn't have any viable options for childcare for Simon for the rest of the summer, and as a single dad it is a challenge to work and keep him occupied. By the time we left Simon was signed up for their End of Summer camp and I had a meeting set up with the family supports coordinator, who helped me to navigate resources through the county.

Simon quickly became a regular at many Friendship Circle programs, my teenage daughter was volunteering at Friendship Circle, and as a single parent, I wasn't as terrified of screwing up Simon because of the support and community I found at Friendship Circle.

In May 2024 I received an email from Beachwood Schools with information on Simon's Extended School Year Program. Simon gets amazing services through Beachwood and is thriving. Unfortunately, Beachwood was having trouble finding enough staff to cover all their ESY students, so they found a program to partner with. While the program looked great, it would be nearly an hour commute to and from our house. I didn't think that was going to work for Simon and I wasn't sure what to do. On a whim I called Friendship Circle and asked, "I know this is a long shot, but is there any chance Simon could do his Extended School program there?" Their answer in a nutshell was, "Don't worry. We got you. This is where he belongs." In less than 2 weeks it was all set and Simon had the best summer of his life.

Then they hit me with a bombshell of good news- they were planning to start offering ABA therapy and asked if I want to sign Simon up. Since January Simon has been going to Friendship Circle four days a week after school and on Sunday!

Friendship Circle has given Simon and our family and many, many other kids and families so much not just because they believe in and love what they are doing, but because all the staff and volunteers have such love for each and every participant. Little did I know when Simon and I went to that first BBQ we weren't going to find an organization that has services for him, but a family that loves and supports him and his family.



Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. Now I'd like to introduce, Izabella Bashkin, a teen volunteer to share her experience.

Hello everyone, my name is Izabella Bashkin, or Izzy. I'm a junior at Hawken School in Cleveland, Ohio, and I just want to begin by saying thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here and talk about this incredible organization I'm a part of. It's truly an honor to be here today, and I'm excited to share what we do and how we make a difference in our community.

I've been a part of Friendship Circle for several years now, and it has truly become like a second home to me. Over time, I've been involved in nearly every program we offer and have hung out with almost every kid.

Some of my best friends I've met through Friendship Circle, and I'm lucky enough to hang out with them every week and throughout the summer. Whether it's at day camp, a playdate at home, or on field trips, I've never shared more laughs and smiles than I have at Friendship Circle.

But friendship is important for kids of all abilities not just for social and cognitive growth; but also for fostering a sense of acceptance, value, support, and lifelong connections.

Now, I can't speak for the kids, but on behalf of the volunteers, Friendship Circle is by far the most fun and fulfilling experience I've ever had. Not only have I met so many wonderful and kind people, but I've grown as a person as well.

One of my favorite things about spending time with kids, whether it's at Friendship Circle or babysitting, is their honesty. They say exactly what's on their mind and are always true to themselves. I'll admit, some comments have caught me off guard, but I have so much admiration for them because of that.

Personally, I tend to be a bit of a people-pleaser and stay quiet and mold myself to the people I'm with. But it was my third day at Friendship Circle, and I started saying something but then I got self-conscious and cut myself off. And my buddy, Shira, noticed and tapped me on the shoulder, smiled, and told me to finish what I was saying. From then on, I've never felt more comfortable or welcome anywhere else.

Friendship Circle has helped me grow by pushing me outside my comfort zone and teaching me the importance of authentic connection. Through volunteering and building relationships with the kids, I've gained more confidence in myself and learned to embrace individuality.

Overall, Friendship Circle is single handedly responsible for creating an environment where strong, raw, and amazing friendships thrive, and I'm so thankful for the opportunity to be a part of it.

Thank you for considering this request. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.