



# INDEPENDENCE

OF PORTAGE COUNTY

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

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

I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Kassondra Dimit, and I am the Director of ICF & ADS Programs for Independence of Portage County. We are headquartered in Ravenna, Ohio and serve multiple counties across northeastern Ohio. We provide a wide variety of services to **Intermediate Care Facilities, Residential Wavier Services, Adult Day Services, Employment Services, and Remote Monitoring Services for Individuals with intellectual disabilities** administered by the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD). Our team of 200 employees are proud to provide essential services to 130 Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

First, I want to express our deep gratitude for the historic investment in disability services in the last state budget. The funding increase helped providers like us recover from a decade-long crisis that led to devastating workforce shortages. Thanks to your support, we have been able to:

- Increase applicants, allowing us to fill critical positions and provide more reliable services.
- Reduce overtime costs, which are necessary for coverage but are not reimbursed by Medicaid.
- Expand services to individuals we previously had to turn away due to staffing shortages.
- Implement quality measures by implementing innovative technology.
- Increase wages, with our current average Direct Support Professional wage at 18.50 per hour.

I have worked in this field for 16 years in various roles, and my career began as a direct support professional, otherwise known as a DSP. I personally have lived, breathed, walked, and observed as a supervisor, the life of both a DSP and a Frontline Supervisor.

The work that DSP's and frontline supervisors do every single day is truly remarkable. DSP's and frontline supervisor's work tirelessly to assist people with disabilities with tasks that most of us take for granted. DSP's and Frontline supervisors are trained to assist individuals with cooking, processing diet textures, eating assistance, bathing care, using the restroom, personal hygiene, administering daily medications, utilizing transfer lift devices, laundry and housekeeping tasks, transportation, medical appointments, exploring the community, first aid and medical care, providing positive re-direction and behavior support strategies, and many more tasks than we can truly count. In addition to these daily responsibilities, the DSP's and frontline supervisors must also work through communication barriers with everyone served. Many individuals with disabilities are faced with speech impairments that affect the clarity of their speech, and others are non-verbal, so a significant amount of time is devoted to speaking with individuals to determine their wants, needs, and desires to provide the most person-centered care to allow each individual to feel heard, valued, and seen as an individual, and not as "just another client".

Although we obtained a substantial wage increase from legislators in the 2024 budget cycle for DSP's, we still have progress to make to pay both the DSP's and Frontline Supervisors competitive wages for the amount of direct care and administrative work they do to meet compliance standards set within our current regulations. In the current regulations there are financial pressures that impact our ability to offer competitive wages, which in turn affects our staff recruitment and retention efforts. It has also proven difficult to recruit new employees as their perception of DSP's and Frontline supervisor positions is that the job is overly regulated and extremely stressful without adequate wages for the amount of work that is required to be completed.

Not only is it difficult to recruit for these positions, but it is also challenging to retain employees in the DSP and frontline supervisor roles, as our current regulatory environment leads to employee burnout. Our employees are simply overworked, underpaid, and still expected to work whatever hours are necessary to meet regulatory compliance standards, and it is exacerbating our workforce for the increasing population of people with disabilities who will require support and services currently and in the future. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic we were able to grow and develop leaders within our field, but as we are still catching up with administrative work from working with limited employees

throughout the pandemic, while also working to keep compliant with current regulations in place, we no longer have the capacity to support our current DSP's and frontline supervisors to develop them into up-and-coming leaders.

I am also advocating for the need of financial support to cover the costs of compliance and to improve the wages of DSP's and frontline supervisors. I also would ask that work together to help regulators understand that we work with humans in an ever-changing field, where we understand that rules are in place for a reason, but we need to recognize that flexibility is necessary, as we are human, and mistakes happen, but we need to look at intent behind mistakes that are made.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for honoring the commitment made in the last General Assembly by using General Revenue Funds (GRF) to maintain the rate increases that were funded in part with ARPA dollars. This investment provides much-needed stability for providers and the people they serve. However, the budget does not include any additional funding to further boost DSP wages, despite the continued workforce crisis and rising costs. The last rate increase took effect in July 2024, and without action from this body, providers face a nearly four-year gap in rate adjustments—putting us right back in the crisis we just emerged from.

To ensure Ohioans with disabilities and their families have access to the care they need, **we urge the General Assembly to:**

- 1. Maintain the Governor's investment** in ICFs, Multi-System Youth, and Technology First initiatives.
- 2. Include a rate increase for waiver providers** to keep up with inflation and workforce demands.
- 3. Establish a mechanism for ongoing increases** to prevent future funding crises.

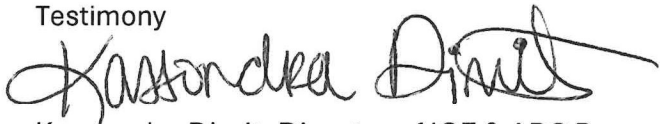
Investing in DD services is not just about providers—it's about ensuring Ohioans with disabilities receive the care and support they need to live full, independent lives in their communities. We look forward to working with you to build on the progress you've made and keep Ohio moving forward.

Thank you again for the opportunity and privilege to bring my concerns before you and if I can ever be of any help in this process, please let me know.

March 5, 2025

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kassondra Dimit". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end of the name.

Kassondra Dimit, Director of ICF & ADS Programs

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