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Representative Dontavius L. Jarrells **Ohio House District 1**

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Abdullahi, and members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony on House Bill 216, legislation to establish the Actionable Help And New Dignity for Upward Progression pilot program, also known as A HAND UP. I also want to thank my joint sponsor, Rep. Williams, for working alongside me on a bill that helps Ohioans find stability as they enter and grow in the workforce.

Let me begin with a simple question: what happens when working harder makes life harder?

Across Ohio, thousands of families face that reality. A parent accepts a promotion, takes on extra hours, or lands a better-paying job, only to lose the benefits that kept their household steady. The paycheck grows on paper, but the real resources they rely on, child care, health care, food assistance, disappear faster than wages rise.

House Bill 216 addresses this problem directly. It builds a bridge from public assistance to self-sufficiency, creating a path that allows families to move forward instead of falling back.

Nearly four in ten Ohio households, or about 39 percent, live below the ALICE survival threshold. These families earn too much to qualify for help but too little to meet basic needs like food, housing, and child care. They are working, doing everything right, yet a modest raise can push them further behind when benefits suddenly end.

Child care shows this most clearly. To qualify for Publicly Funded Child Care, families generally must earn less than 145 percent of the federal poverty level. Some counties extend eligibility higher, but the gap remains wide. Infant care alone costs more than twelve thousand dollars per year. For two young children, that cost can approach twenty-five thousand dollars. Few families can absorb that loss when their benefits stop.

The same pattern appears with SNAP and Medicaid. Roughly 1.39 million Ohioans relied on SNAP in 2024, and Medicaid eligibility phases out near 138 percent of the poverty level. Research from the Atlanta and Cleveland Federal Reserve Banks shows that even small wage increases can cause sharp declines in total household resources.

House Bill 216 gives Ohio a way to fix this. It directs the Department of Job and Family Services to create a three-year pilot program in four counties: one metropolitan, one

midsized, and two rural, including one Appalachian. The program provides sliding-scale stipends to offset health insurance premiums, deductibles, or child care costs. It also offers employer subsidies to support hiring and retention, along with mentoring and financial literacy programming to help families plan for long-term success.

The legislation also requires a digital tool to help participants understand how changes in wages will affect benefits and take-home income. This brings transparency and predictability to a system that has too often left families uncertain and vulnerable.

The pilot was designed with intention. Urban, suburban, rural, and Appalachian communities each face unique challenges with child care, job access, and cost of living. By testing the program in these diverse regions, Ohio can determine what works best statewide. The bill appropriates ten million dollars in each of fiscal years 2026 and 2027 to support the pilot and evaluate its results.

At its heart, A HAND UP is about dignity. It ensures that work pays. It ensures that a raise truly raises you up. It ensures that families are not punished for personal progress.

Thank you, Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Abdullahi, and members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee for your time and consideration. I am honored to now turn it over to my joint sponsor, Rep. Williams for additional remarks.