



Ohio Clerk of Courts

**Ohio Senate
Finance Committee
May 27, 2025
Interested Party Testimony on HB 96**

Good morning, Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee. My name is Branden Meyer, I am the Fairfield County Common Pleas Clerk and Legislative Co-chair of the Ohio Clerk of Courts Association. Thank you for the opportunity to testify as an interested party on House Bill 96.

We would first like to thank the Ohio House of Representatives for including a provision that allows an elected or appointed Common Pleas Clerk ("Clerk") to apply for grant funding under the Ohio Courts Technology Initiative at the Ohio Supreme Court. Due to recent law changes requiring the Clerk of Courts to publish civil case filings and docketed images online, many of our offices need to upgrade our technology to comply with these new mandates. For example, the House added a provision to House Bill 96 requiring Clerks to provide online criminal dockets. While we are supportive of these law changes, these changes require us to upgrade our technology. Currently, under the Supreme Court's Technology Initiative grant program, Clerks are not eligible applicants for the grants and must apply through a court. The House-added provision streamlines the process and allows the Clerk to directly apply for the grant, rather than through a court. Clerks use these grant funds to purchase technology needed to comply with the recent mandates to put document images online and accept e-filings.

Between 2019 and 2023, the Ohio Supreme Court awarded over \$20 million (\$20,341,968.54) in technology grants. During that timeframe, over \$14 million (\$14,075,512.09) was awarded for case management system-related upgrades. Of that \$14 million, nearly \$8.6 million was awarded to Courts of Common Pleas for their Clerks' case management systems. Also, the Supreme Court has specifically identified e-filing technology upgrades as a priority project for this current grant cycle and case management system upgrades has been identified as a priority in past grant cycles. As this data shows, Clerks utilize a significant portion of the Supreme Court's Technology Initiative grant program to upgrade the technology in our offices. **Therefore, we respectfully request the Ohio Senate maintain the provision in the House-passed version of the budget allowing Clerks to directly apply for grant funding.**

We also respectfully request the inclusion of amendment SC 0099 into HB 96, which makes changes regarding the certificate of title fee outlined in Ohio Revised Code section 4505.09. As a reminder, in addition to maintaining legal filings, the Common Pleas Clerks of Court are responsible for the issuing all vehicle and watercraft titles statewide (more than 5.5 million titles per year). Other titling services that some Clerks provide to their constituents include operating driver's examination stations in partnership with the BMV, issuing watercraft registrations (in addition to watercraft titles), and accepting passport applications. The cost of operating the title side of the Clerk's office is supported by title and other BMV-rated fees. The current title fee

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dispersed to the Clerk has not kept pace with the rising costs of operations and the financial realities faced by our offices are becoming increasingly unsustainable. **The last time the title fee was increased was in the transportation budget bill in 2009** (House Bill 2, 128th General Assembly). The fee was increased from \$5.00 to \$15.00.

Currently, the Certificate of Title \$15.00 fee is disbursed as follows:

- \$11.50 to the Clerk of Courts
- \$0.04 to the Motor Vehicle Dealer's Board Fund
- \$0.21 to the Highway Operating Fund
- \$0.25 to the Motor Vehicle Sales Audit Fund
- \$1.00 to the Public Safety Highway Purposes Fund
- \$2.00 to the Automated Title Processing Fund

As you see, out of the \$15.00, the Clerk's office retains only \$11.50. Over the past 16 years, our operational costs have steadily increased, largely due to inflation and the rising costs of wages, rent, utilities, and other essential office needs. For example, in 2009, a starting employee in my office earned \$11.00 per hour, totaling \$38,548.24 in salary and family health benefits. Today, a starting employee earns \$18.19 per hour, bringing the total salary and benefits to \$67,966.06—an increase of 76%. Also, you will see attached to our testimony a chart with how much operational costs have increased in other Clerk offices across the state.

Given these challenges, **we respectfully request that the legislature increase the amount of the title fee retained by the Clerk's office from \$11.50 to \$16.50 per title, as reflected in amendment SC 0099.** This increase is urgently needed to ensure that we can retain qualified staff, maintain competitive wages, and continue to serve the public efficiently.

It is also important to note that an increase to \$20.00 in Ohio's title fee is in line with neighboring states, many of which charge significantly more. For comparison:

- Pennsylvania: \$55.00
- Indiana: \$15.00 to receive title in a week, \$40.00 for expedited
- Illinois: \$150.00 to receive title by mail, \$180.00 for expedited
- Kentucky: \$9.00 to receive title in 48 hours, \$34.00 for expedited
- West Virginia: \$10.00 to receive same day OTC, 7-10 days for mail-in applications
- Michigan: \$15.00 to receive title 7-10 days, \$20.00 for same day

In Ohio, customers receive their title immediately. In many of our neighboring states, same-day service is not available, and if expedited services are provided, there are additional fees. By increasing the title fee a reasonable amount, we can ensure Ohio remains competitive while continuing to provide immediate title issuance for our residents.

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In closing, an increase in the title fee is not only necessary for the financial sustainability of our office but also for maintaining the high quality of service that our residents expect. This modest fee increase will help ensure that our title offices remain fully operational, adequately staffed, and capable of providing timely and efficient service to the public. Thank you for your time and consideration and I am happy to answer any questions.

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