



THE CENTERS
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**Testimony submitted to the Senate Finance Committee
May 27, 2025**

**Eric Morse, MSSA, LISW-S
Chief Executive Officer, The Centers**

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 96. My name is Eric Morse and I serve as the CEO of The Centers in Cuyahoga County. The Centers serves nearly 21,000 people per year and employs 650 staff across 11 locations throughout Greater Cleveland, providing access to integrated healthcare services, early childhood education, family support, workforce development, and youth residential treatment. Our multi-service approach connects individuals and families with the resources and support they need to build better lives and brighter futures.

At our five Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC) in Greater Cleveland, The Centers provides community-based, integrated physical and behavioral health care to patients without regard for their insurance status or ability to pay. Our compassionate and judgment-free services ensure low-income Ohioans—including those living with a mental health condition, substance use disorder, or chronic illness—can access the care they need to get healthy, maintain employment, and care for their families. By reaching our patients upstream in community settings, our services are also cost effective for payers like the state’s Medicaid plans by preventing the need for treatment in more costly settings. For example, one out of every six people who visit our Behavioral Health Urgent Care Centers report they would have otherwise gone to the emergency room for their symptoms, while another 40% said they were unsure where they would have gone. The Centers also actively works to reduce dependence on public benefits through services like our El Barrio Workforce Development program. El Barrio has a long history of helping people achieve a life-sustaining income and move off public assistance by learning job skills and earning credentials to obtain employment in high demand industries, no matter their previous educational attainment.

I want to thank the General Assembly for your commitment in recent years to strengthen Ohio’s behavioral health continuum of care, including funding in the last State Operating Budget to grow The Centers’ Behavioral Health Urgent Care services and in last year’s Capital Budget to jumpstart The Centers’ H.O.P.E. Campus. These one-time investments have made a lasting impact in building a strong behavioral health care continuum in Cuyahoga County. We also applaud investments proposed in Governor DeWine’s budget and sustained by the House that support the community behavioral health system, expand crisis infrastructure, and further the implementation of Ohio’s Certified Community Behavioral Health Center (CCBHC) model. I strongly encourage this body to maintain these critical investments in H.B. 96.

While I am encouraged by the robust funding levels for behavioral health programs in H.B. 96, we know there is no more important tool than Ohio’s Medicaid program for ensuring access to mental health and addiction treatment. The Centers joins the advocacy efforts of the Ohio Medicaid Matters Coalition in urging the Senate to change the Medicaid expansion “trigger” language in H.B. 96. As currently written, this provision would immediately discontinue health coverage for nearly 800,000 Ohioans in the event that the federal matching percentage for the expansion population falls below 90%. We ask that you change the word “shall” to “may” in the trigger language to ensure the legislature and administration retain flexibility and control over the best



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strategy to mitigate the impact of any future cut in the federal matching rate.

The Centers is also highly committed to working with the state to craft solutions to Ohio's child welfare crisis. In April, we celebrated the groundbreaking of The Centers' H.O.P.E. Campus alongside Cuyahoga County leaders, members of the DeWine Administration, and Northeast Ohio legislators. The Centers' H.O.P.E. Campus will ensure youth in County custody have a safe and therapeutic place to stay, promoting a comprehensive model for assisting with rapid reunification and kinship diversion for children in county custody, while providing a safe location where youth awaiting placement can be assessed and receive treatment. We thank Governor DeWine for recognizing the potential in this innovative model and including \$30 million in his budget proposal to assist with the establishment of regional Child Wellness Campuses modeled after The Centers' H.O.P.E. Campus.

Lastly, I urge the Senate to restore funding to the 9-8-8 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, which was reduced by the House to \$20 million each fiscal year—below current operational costs. Next year, The Centers will open Cuyahoga County's first 24/7 Crisis Receiving and Stabilization Center in partnership with OhioMHAS and the Cuyahoga County ADAMHS Board. The 9-8-8 lifeline will be a critical resource for immediately connecting individuals experiencing a psychiatric crisis to our care in a safe, secure environment for behavioral health intervention. It is important to consider that many individuals in crisis end up in the care of law enforcement. Rather than tasking the justice system and law enforcement officers with treating people who are struggling with behavioral health conditions, those who are non-violent offenders will have an appropriate alternative to arrest or emergency room visits with access to this center. This approach will reduce the number of persons with mental illness in jails and demonstrate this community's commitment to improving public health, safety and well-being for those in crisis. We ask the Senate to increase the amount of 9-8-8 funding from the House-passed version by \$10.3 million in SFY 26 and \$11.5 million in SFY 27 to meet demand.

Thank you for hearing my testimony today. I also ask that you consider my colleague Carole Beaty's written testimony that lays out The Centers' early childhood budget priorities. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with the Legislature and Administration to ensure all Ohioans have the opportunity to thrive. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.