



**Senate Finance Committee
Substitute House Bill 96
Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center Community
Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Jennell Vick, Ph.D., President & CEO
Amber Holcomb, Client Mother
May 27, 2025**

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Dr. Jennell Vick, and I am the President & CEO of Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center, home of Cleveland's Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. I am here today representing Ohio's seven Community Centers for the Deaf and Hard of hearing and the thousands of deaf individuals we serve every year, including Amber Holcomb, a mother who you will hear from shortly. Other Community Centers for the Deaf are in Dayton, Columbus, Cincinnati, Youngstown, Canton, and Akron.

Over 90 percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents. Many families never learn American Sign Language (ASL). This means that the deaf child never learns any language and we refer to them as having language deprivation. This is very common in deaf individuals in Ohio. It means that these individuals cannot access basic services in everyday life, which can lead to a feeling of isolation, identity loss, exclusion, and a lack of cultural identity. The deaf community has been greatly impacted by this and many of our deaf adult clients have the reading ability of 2-3 grade.

Navigating the world with a second grade reading level is extremely difficult, and on top of that, most community resources do not have ASL access. This is why our community centers are so important to the deaf community. We help them to access and navigate information they need to thrive and gain independence.

Ohio's Community Centers for the Deaf serve all 88 counties with very meager resources. Limited state funding is available for this work through Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD), which administers \$527,000 in GRF each fiscal year through the "Services for the Deaf" line item. These funds are disbursed between the Community Centers for the Deaf to fund one full time equivalent employee at each site.

An additional \$772,420 in funding has been provided to Ohio's Community Centers for the Deaf because of OOD's participation in the Social Security Vocational Rehabilitation Cost Reimbursement program. Leadership from Ohio's Community Centers for the Deaf learned, on March 5, that OOD has had a devastating reduction in Social Security Cost Reimbursements in Fiscal Year 2025. This reduction has created a negative impact on OOD cash balances, and we were notified that our funding would, therefore, be unavailable over the biennium.

The impact of any cut to the small allocation that each Community Center for the Deaf receives will be devastating. We will be unable to retain our staff members, who are specially trained to provide services for

those who are deaf using ASL as the primary communication method. Our deaf and hard of hearing support staff, who are charged with traveling to the remote counties of our state to provide services, will likely be unable to continue these services. Deaf residents of rural counties will lose access to these life-sustaining services. These residents of your districts who are working, today, on the skills necessary to enter the workforce, will no longer have hope of fulfilling their potential and supporting their communities. This impact will be felt immediately.

I am here today to respectfully request your support for a \$800,000 appropriation each fiscal year for Community Centers for the Deaf so that we can continue our work with deaf individuals and their families across the State of Ohio.

Now I'd like to introduce you to Amber Holcomb, mother of Theo, to share how services provided by the Community Centers have impacted their journey.

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Committee. My name is Amber Holcomb, and I am the mother of a wonderful 3-year-old named Theo, who was born profoundly deaf. I am here today as a concerned parent to speak in support of a budget amendment to increase funding for Ohio's Community Centers for the Deaf.

When our son Theo was born, he was perfect. I didn't think twice when they came into the room for the newborn hearing screen. The setting was normal, just like when my daughter had it done 3 years prior: in the hospital room bassinet next to my bed. He was hooked up to the machine, the nurse was making idle small talk with me, then came the first time we heard "he failed". I would love to say I didn't panic, but I did. "It's probably just fluid in the ears from the C-section" is what they told me, "We will reassess it later".

A few weeks after discharge from the hospital I took my newborn to his first audiology appointment. They hooked his head up to wires and shoved things in his ears, I sat there with him in my arms and stared at him while he slept through all the beeps that I could clearly hear without assistance. I stared at the unmoving face of his Audiologist, trying to get a read on what she was seeing/thinking.

When it was finished, she said, "We are going to be such good friends" and told me he was severe to profoundly deaf in both ears. My first thought was "I don't want to be friends; I just want my son to be OK". And we would be, but I didn't know that yet.

Deafness wasn't something that had ever crossed our minds during pregnancy. Especially not in a family like ours, with no history of hearing loss. We were blindsided. There was grief, confusion, fear—questions we didn't know how to ask, let alone answer. At some point I told his Dad he could leave if he didn't want this life, I was emotional (obviously). What would communication look like? Would he feel alone? How would we help him thrive in a world that often doesn't see or understand deafness? Would our family learn how to communicate with him? What about school? Friends?

Theo was just 3 to 4 months old when we entered an early intervention program through the state. It was the beginning of everything; I couldn't even imagine at the time how important this would be for our journey. Our audiologist and speech therapist came into our home, not only to support Theo's development, but to walk with us through an entirely new world. They were our bridge—teaching us, encouraging us, and introducing us to something we didn't know we needed: the Deaf community.

Theo has cochlear implants and uses both spoken English and American Sign Language (ASL). This bilingual approach isn't just a method of communication—it's a way for him to connect with both worlds, to have choices, to be fully himself. Giving Theo cochlear implants at 9 months old was not to make him "hearing" or "normal". He will never be hearing, he will always be Deaf. His experience is unique. His needs are unique.

We live in Wickliff in Lake County. Northeast Ohio doesn't have a Deaf school, and the Deaf community here is small. Community centers help families navigate complex systems—education, healthcare, and daily life—while

giving our children a space where they are not isolated but connected and celebrated. Through the Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center, we began attending community events and met other parents and children like Theo. Watching him play with other deaf kids, seeing him light up when someone signed to him—that's when it clicked. This is where he belongs. This is his community. This is what he is a part of, even though we are not. We've met kids just like him and adults just like us who are also new to navigating this world. I've made friends that I would have never met without the Cleveland Hearing and Speech center.

Most people don't give the Deaf community a second thought. It's an invisible disability. You can't see the extra effort it takes to stay in a conversation, or the isolation that can creep in when others forget to include you. Theo will face challenges that we won't fully understand, but we can do everything possible to make sure he never faces them alone.

At the heart of it, all parents want the same things: for our children to be recognized, to be included, and to have every chance to grow with confidence and pride in who they are. That's what these centers make possible. And that's why we must ensure they remain open.

This amendment is about more than funding—it's about fairness, inclusion, and investing in people who deserve the tools to succeed. I ask you to support this amendment—not just for my child, but for every family relying on our leadership to create a more equitable and compassionate Ohio.

Thank you for your service and for listening to my perspective today.

