



Ohio Children's Alliance

Leading change for child and family service providers

Ohio Senate Finance Committee

May xx, 2025

Ohio Children's Alliance Testimony on HB 96

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on HB 96.

My name is Mark Mecum, CEO of the Ohio Children's Alliance. Since 2011, I have led this statewide nonprofit advocacy organization. Our focus is on improving Ohio's system of care for children and families with a particular focus on child welfare and behavioral health. We pursue our work through partnerships with our network of 90 community-based organizations as well as advocacy coalitions, funders, and state agencies.

We come before you today with a deep stake in the outcome of this budget, because its provisions directly affect children and families struggling with mental illness and youth experiencing foster care. I will focus my testimony on key items in the budget that have direct implications on Ohio's foster care, behavioral health, and Medicaid systems.

Child Welfare and Foster Care Priorities

Foster Care Rate Reform

Due to the unprecedented supply and demand dynamics facing our children services system, there are several reported concerns of group homes over-charging counties and other payors for placement services. Group homes are just one type of provider of "out of home care", along side foster care agencies and children's residential centers. In HB 96, there is new language that would dramatically impact contracting and funding to all types of the hundreds of "out of home care" agencies in Ohio.

The intent of the proposed language is to produce greater consistency and transparency to foster care pricing. However, we have serious concerns that this goal would be met through the new language. In fact, we are concerned that the impact could cause under-funding of foster care services or, conversely, increase the overall costs paid by counties. The proposed "rate card" strategy has not yet been vetted or adequately introduced to foster families, agencies, or stakeholders.

We want to keep the momentum going on identifying improvements to Ohio's foster care system and to address the concern about group home costs. We suggest the General Assembly adopt Amendment SC0716 which would establish a legislator-led workgroup tasked with studying foster care financing reform.

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Child Wellness Campuses

We are grateful for the proposed investment in the creation of regional Child Wellness Campuses. Expansion of short-term crisis stabilization facilities would offer a much-needed solution for youth with complex behavioral health needs who have nowhere else to go. For too long, some children have spent nights in county offices or bounced between hospitals and temporary placements due to a lack of capacity and coordination in the system. Establishment of these campuses will serve as a bridge, stabilizing children in crisis while giving counties time to identify and secure the right long-term placement. These sites can provide on-site behavioral health evaluations, treatment planning, and trauma-informed care. We support this investment and urge the Senate to retain it in the final budget.

State Child Protection Allocation

We support continued investment in the State Child Protection Allocation, which is essential to the functioning of our local child protection system. County children services agencies rely on this funding to fulfill their core mission from intake and investigation to permanency planning and placement support. At a time when case complexity is increasing and staff recruitment remains a challenge, we call on the Legislatures to preserve this funding.

Licensure Suspension

A provision in the Department of Children and Youth budget language would grant the department new authority to immediately suspend the license of an entire agency or foster family without due process under in some circumstances. We are concerned that this provision will cause more agencies and families to quit the foster care system. We urge the General Assembly to revise this provision by:

- Requiring a clearly defined timeline for investigations and reinstatement decisions, to prevent indefinite disruptions.
- Maintaining due process protections for agencies, staff, and foster parents.

At a time when our placement capacity is already strained, we cannot afford to lose more trusted providers due to broad, preemptive licensing actions.

Foster-to-College

We urge the Senate to amend HB 96 to include funding and statutory language to establish a Foster-to-College Scholarship Program to empower youth aging out of foster care to achieve their educational goals. This provision is not yet included in HB 96. It was

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passed by the Ohio House of Representatives in the last General Assembly with bipartisan support but ultimately did not pass the Senate before the end of the session.

Foster youth face unique barriers to post-secondary success: they often lack stable housing, financial support, and family guidance. Without targeted assistance, many are unable to access or complete college. By establishing a tuition waiver or scholarship fund, Ohio can help level the playing field for these young people and support their transition to independence.

Behavioral Health Priorities

Student Wellness and Success Funding

The Student Wellness and Success Funds remain one of Ohio's most important tools for supporting student mental health. These flexible, locally-driven funds allow schools to partner with community providers to deliver prevention services, early intervention, and trauma-informed care. We urge the legislature to maintain strong support for this funding, which benefits students far beyond academic outcomes.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

We are concerned about the proposed reduction in funding for 988 crisis services included in House Bill 96. The bill alters how marijuana tax revenue is distributed, reducing the portion allocated to the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services for 988 operations and prevention from 25% to 14%. This change comes at a time when demand for youth mental health crisis response continues to grow, and 988 has become a critical access point for families in distress.

Ohio voters approved a plan to invest marijuana tax revenue in behavioral health services, and we believe that promise should be honored. We respectfully urge the Senate to restore the original allocation to ensure Ohio's 988 infrastructure remains strong, responsive, and accessible to youth and families across the state.

OhioRISE

We also commend the continued funding and support for OhioRISE, the state's specialized Medicaid program for youth with complex behavioral health needs. In just a few years, OhioRISE has built a statewide infrastructure for care coordination that brings families, providers, and systems together. It has already demonstrated reductions in emergency department visits and psychiatric hospitalizations.

The families served by OhioRISE are often navigating multiple systems — mental health, child welfare, developmental disabilities, juvenile justice. The program's intensive care

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coordination gives them a single point of accountability and support. Sustaining and strengthening OhioRISE should remain a top priority.

Medicaid Behavioral Health Rates

Finally, we urge the legislature to continue improving Medicaid reimbursement rates for community behavioral health services. The behavioral health workforce remains under immense pressure. Low rates make it difficult to recruit and retain qualified providers, particularly in rural and underserved communities. To meet growing demand, Ohio must ensure that community-based organizations are compensated fairly and sustainably.

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the committee, thank you for your time. The provisions in this bill have real-world consequences for children in foster care, families in crisis, and providers on the front lines.

The Ohio Children's Alliance stands ready to work with the General Assembly to shape a state budget that invests wisely, protects access to care, and puts children and families at the center of reform. I welcome any questions you may have. Thank you.

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