

OHIO SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE

Interested Party Testimony on Amended Substitute House Bill 96

*Sonya M. Pryor-Jones
Chief of Youth and Family Success
City of Cleveland*

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee — thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony on the portion of Am. Sub. House Bill 96 focusing on child care.

As Chief of Youth and Family Success for the City of Cleveland, I want to offer written testimony emphasizing the critical need for robust investment in child care. The City of Cleveland, like many communities, is deeply impacted by the challenges facing our child care system — challenges that affect families, early childhood educators, businesses, and, most importantly, our children.

Quality, affordable child care is more than a support service — it is an essential economic driver. It enables parents to work, businesses to retain reliable employees, and children to receive the foundational skills they need for lifelong success. Yet, significant gaps remain in Ohio’s child care system:

- **Workforce Challenge:** Nearly one in five early childhood educators left the field between 2023 and 2024. Over half (58%) of Ohio child care programs report staffing shortages, limiting available slots for families.
- **Affordability:** Child care remains unaffordable for too many Ohio families. Nearly half of parents with children under five (49%) report difficulty finding child care, and 73% describe it as “expensive.”
- **Economic Impact:** The economy is losing talent. Forty-four percent of working parents missed work or left early in the past two years because of child care disruptions, and nearly one million Ohio workers have cut back hours for the same reason.

Along with child care advocates and organizations, we respectfully urge the Ohio Senate to consider the following actions to support families, strengthen our workforce, and ensure children have a strong start:

- **Restore the Full \$300 Million in TANF Funds for Child Care:** This funding is essential to maintaining access to high-quality, affordable child care for working families across the state. Cutting these funds would weaken one of our most effective anti-poverty and workforce tools.
- **Increase Initial Eligibility for Publicly Funded Child Care (PFCC) to 160% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL):** Raising eligibility would open the door to child care for an additional 11,000 children each year — families of three earning up to \$42,640. This change would help Ohio move out of last place among states in child care access.
- **Maintain Early Learning Supports, Including the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA):** The KRA is Ohio’s only statewide measure of early learning impact. It provides critical data to identify learning gaps and target resources, ensuring children are prepared for success.

In Cleveland, the impact of child care challenges is clear. The average cost of one infant’s care in Cuyahoga County is \$1,418 per month, a total of \$17,000 annually. Those costs exceed the ability of

many working families to pay for child care in Cleveland, where the median income is \$37,271. This forces parents to make difficult choices between work and care. Our early childhood programs are losing educators faster than we can replace them, limiting the number of available slots for children. Meanwhile, local businesses report ongoing workforce shortages as parents struggle to maintain consistent employment.

But there is hope. We know that expanding access to affordable, quality child care can transform lives and strengthen our economy. For example, a one-time, \$2.3 million ARPA investment in scholarships for families supported care coverage for 370 children. Among those families, 79% had lost employment or were at risk of job loss because of unstable child care, and 63% struggled to meet their basic needs as a result of child care costs.

In summary, investing in child care today prevents more costly problems tomorrow — from workforce shortages to academic remediation. Parents want to work. Early childhood professionals need support. Businesses need reliable employees. And children deserve a fair start.

Thank you for your leadership and for considering these critical investments. We stand ready to partner with you to improve the quality of life for our families and ensure every child and every parent can contribute fully to our state's economic future.