

Testimony on HB 96 (FY26-27 State Budget)
by Adam Herman, CEO
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Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, on behalf of the Ohio Association of County Boards of Developmental Disabilities (OACB), thank you for the opportunity to testify on House Bill 96, the State Operating Budget.

Ohio's 88 county boards of developmental disabilities support more than 107,000 people with developmental disabilities and their families by providing funding, planning support, and a wide range of services that help individuals live happy, healthy, and fulfilling lives.

Access to Early Intervention (EI) services is a fundamental right under Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). As providers of EI services, county boards of DD have built a strong network of service coordinators, developmental specialists, and occupational, physical, and speech therapists who specialize in family-centered practices. As the only government entities in Ohio responsible for funding the direct provision of EI services to children with developmental disabilities under the age of three, county boards have seen a significant increase in demand.

From State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2016 to SFY 2023, statewide referrals for EI services rose by 34.4%, with the number of children served increasing by 34.1% over the same period. This rapid growth has driven up both referral and service delivery costs. As a result, the cost of service coordination often exceeds the amount provided by the state's grant formula, requiring county boards to use locally raised property tax dollars to meet the state's maintenance of effort obligations.

For this reason, county boards and the families we serve strongly support the Department of Children and Youth's request for increased Part C EI funding in Governor DeWine's proposed budget. The request includes \$7 million in SFY 2026 and an additional \$9 million in SFY 2027 to support critical evaluation and assessment activities. This increase will allow county boards to put more local funds toward providing direct services to more infants and toddlers during their critical developmental years. Another challenge is the increasing number of referral requests for multi-system youth—children who qualify for county board services and are also involved with other systems such as behavioral health, addiction services, juvenile courts, child protective services, and Family and Children First Councils (FCFCs). A 2023 survey by OACB found that more than 1,500 such children are actively engaged with these local agencies. This trend has exposed inconsistencies in how local entities collaborate and share funding responsibilities.

County boards of DD also support the Department of Children and Youth's allocation to maintain \$25 million in annual funding for the Multi-System Youth line item in SFY 2026 and 2027. Additionally, we support the proposed \$30 million in biennial funding for the development of regional wellness campuses. These investments will improve coordination across agencies, enhance care for children in foster care with developmental or behavioral needs, and expand access in counties not currently serving this population.

Two years ago, Ohio's developmental disabilities service system faced a workforce crisis. Providers struggled to hire and retain direct support professionals (DSPs) due to uncompetitive wages. Many DSPs left for higher-paying jobs in industries such as retail, hospitality, and warehousing, leaving

individuals with disabilities without the reliable care they depend on. At the core of this issue were Medicaid waiver reimbursement rates, which had not increased meaningfully in more than a decade. In response, the General Assembly approved significant local, state, and federal investments in the last budget. These investments stabilized the system and allowed providers to raise wages and retain qualified staff.

Thanks to that support, DSPs now receive more competitive compensation, leading to a more stable workforce and more consistent, higher-quality services. People with developmental disabilities are now experiencing greater independence, reliability, and dignity in their daily lives. County boards are especially thankful to Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for continuing this commitment by using state general revenue funds to sustain these rate increases despite broader budget pressures. This continued support protects recent progress and ensures that individuals with developmental disabilities can continue to live meaningful lives in their communities.

That is why county boards strongly support the funding proposed in House Bill 96 to maintain these DSP wage increases. These state funds supplement the one-time federal dollars used in the previous budget. We also appreciate the continued investment in intermediate care facilities and state developmental centers through modest funding increases for services delivered in non-community settings. These investments provide county boards and their provider partners with the resources needed to deliver essential services across Ohio.

While we are encouraged by many aspects of House Bill 96, there are also concerns we would like to raise.

OACB supports the “As Introduced” language that formally establishes supported decision-making as a person-centered alternative to guardianship. Supported decision-making allows individuals with developmental disabilities to make informed decisions with guidance from trusted family, friends, or advisors—rather than having decisions made for them. This model is flexible and structured, respecting individual autonomy while still providing necessary support. It mirrors how we all make decisions in our lives, and we urge the re-inclusion of this language in the final version of the bill.

Another area of concern is a provision in the House-passed version of the budget that would require a 30-day web-based training program for conditional Services and Support Administrators (SSAs). Conditional SSAs are case managers who only have an associate’s degree or are still working toward meeting certain requirements of obtaining a standard SSA position. While similar training is already required for all SSAs by administrative rule, this mandate would apply to no more than 100 out of nearly 2,300 SSAs statewide. County boards believe the 30-day timeline is too short to ensure proper, thorough training and have requested an amendment to remove this requirement. We also believe that state statute is not the place for a new training requirement affecting less than 100 people, and that it can be instead better accomplished within existing administrative rule requirements.

Finally, OACB and its local partners are concerned about language that would allow a board of county commissioners to block the formation or renewal of a county’s Family and Children First Council. With the rise in multi-system youth, FCFCs have solidified their role as essential partners in coordinating services across agencies. County boards regularly collaborate with FCFCs to ensure that children with complex needs receive the care they need. OACB opposes this provision and supports an amendment to remove it from the Senate substitute bill.

The needs of Ohioans with developmental disabilities are diverse and complex, and they require coordinated, thoughtful solutions. House Bill 96 offers a chance to strengthen what's working, address areas of concern, and ensure that people with developmental disabilities receive the support they need to live full, meaningful lives. We thank the committee for your continued partnership and for your thoughtful consideration of our testimony.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.