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House Bill 96—Interested Party
Senate Finance Committee
Benjamin Robison, President, Association of Ohio Health Commissioners
May 29, 2025

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 96. I am Ben Robison, Health Commissioner for the Wood County Health Department, and I currently serve as President of the Association of Ohio Health Commissioners (AOHC).

AOHC represents all of Ohio's 111 health districts. We work to strengthen local public health leadership and advocate to improve health outcomes for all Ohioans. Public health addresses the causes and conditions that disrupt childhood education, reduce workforce participation, drive up medical costs, and limit the quality and length of life.

I want to acknowledge the health benefits of key proposals included in House Bill 96, as passed by the House of Representatives, including improving access to vision and dental care for children, providing diabetes education in schools, and expanding school-based health centers.

As you continue your review of House Bill 96, we ask that you consider the following provisions:

PUBLIC HEALTH LAB

The Ohio Department of Health's Public Health Laboratory ("Lab") is the backbone for disease detection, monitoring, and response in the state. The Lab and its dedicated staff have a proven track record of identifying, preventing, and mitigating infectious diseases, foodborne illnesses, and environmental health threats.

The Lab works closely with hospitals, law enforcement agencies, and local health departments across the state as a critical partner in disease detection—a process that starts at the local level but affects the entire state in preventing the spread of communicable disease, limiting the impact of bioterrorism, and detecting genetic conditions that jeopardize the lives of newborns if not quickly diagnosed and treated. This in-state capacity ensures the fastest possible response to new illnesses, supporting the care of individuals and protections for the general public.

Maintaining this capability is the cornerstone of informed, evidence-based response to the health needs of our residents. The lab is supported by two GRF line items (ALI 440451 \$3.9 million in each fiscal year and ALI 440472 which includes \$1.3 million in each fiscal year). ***The Public Health Lab has not seen a substantial increase in state GRF investment since 2013.*** Level funding strains the Lab's ability to conduct equipment maintenance, improve technology and expertise to keep pace with new and emerging infections, and continue to provide the high

level of service that keeps our communities safer and healthier. Federal grant resources that helped to sustain the lab's work are expiring.

The Administration's budget proposal used proceeds from an increased marijuana tax to invest in the Public Health Lab. With the removal of the tax provision, the increased investment was removed. We ask that you support Governor DeWine's requested investment in the Public Health Lab by adding \$9.9 million in FY 2026 and \$14.8 million in FY 2027. **(Amendment SC1836).**

HELP ME GROW and the FAMILY CONNECTS PROGRAM

While we have seen recent movement in the right direction, Ohio's infant and maternal mortality rates are still unacceptably high. Most of these deaths are preventable. Evidence-based interventions and strategies, including home visiting, will work to reduce these rates.

- Leading causes of infant death in Ohio like prematurity and obstetric conditions can be mitigated through appropriate interventions that home visiting nurses can provide their clients.
- Families enrolled in evidence-based home visiting programs during pregnancy are less likely to have a premature baby.
- Home visiting programs have also been shown to produce healthcare cost savings, acting as a key point of prevention.

For more than 100 years, local public health departments have been providing home visiting services through public health nurses. Today, Ohio's public health nurses utilize their expertise in home visiting and case management through various state and local programs, including Help Me Grow, Early Intervention, the state program for children needing complex medical help (CMH), and county-created newborn home visiting programs. Unfortunately, due to limited funding, these programs are not consistently available across all communities, and the need far outpaces the current capacity.

Governor DeWine's budget proposal included an investment to grow home visiting access to 25,000 additional children and make the evidenced-based Family Connects Ohio program available in all 88 counties—ensuring that all new parents in Ohio are offered free home visits from a registered nurse.

The House removed increased funding for home visiting services in FY27 which would extend Family Connects to all counties. We ask that you restore this \$22.5 million investment in the Help Me Grow line item. **(Amendment SC0458)**

COUNTY BUDGET COMMISSION MEMBERSHIP

The House added a provision that removes the county prosecutor from the three-member county budget commission and makes the president of the board of county commissioners a member instead. The commission currently comprises the county auditor, the county treasurer, and the county prosecutor.

The prosecutor offers an objective, conflict-free review of all budget requests at the county level and serves an important role by bringing legal expertise in reviewing and approving tax budgets, ensuring they comply with all relevant laws and regulations.

We ask that you remove this provision and maintain the current makeup of the county budget commission. **(Comp Doc LOCCD19, Amendment SC0889)**

SOIL EVALUATORS

The House added a provision that prohibits the ODH Director from adopting rules requiring a soil evaluator or soil scientist to evaluate the soil type and slope with respect to a household sewage treatment system or a proposed household sewage treatment system.

It is important to have a soil evaluation before installing a home septic system in Ohio because the soil type and conditions directly affect how well the system will function. This review is more important in some Ohio geographies than others. A soil review protects a homeowner that installs a costly septic system from future repairs, expands the lifetime of a system, and protects the community from potential soil and water contamination. While removing the requirement of a soil evaluation may save money in the short term, it could mean costly repairs and premature system replacement in the long term.

Local health departments already have the ability to—and do—waive the evaluation in situations where enough data on soil condition is available. We ask you to remove this provision to maintain the current protections accomplished through soil evaluation. **(Comp Doc DOHCD36, Amendment SC0261)**

LEAD ABATEMENT

Thousands of Ohio children under the age of six have been poisoned by lead, and many more continue to be exposed to lead hazards. There is no safe level of lead in the blood and no interventions that can reverse the damage to a child's development and learning abilities.

The House eliminated the \$1 million appropriation for the Lead-Safe Home Fund and reduced funding for the Lead Abatement program from \$7 million to just \$250,000 in each fiscal year.

This funding allowed the Ohio Department of Health to work collaboratively with local health departments to do lead testing and offer follow-up care to affected families. The Lead-Safe Home Fund assisted with the costly process to remove lead hazards in homes where young children reside.

The problem of lead poisoning is completely preventable and is one we can solve. We ask that you restore \$1 million each fiscal year for the Lead Safe Home Fund, and \$7 million each fiscal year for Lead Abatement services. **(Comp Doc DOHCD12, Amendment SC0324)**

SOLID WASTE AND CONSTRUCTION AND DEMOLITION DEBRIS FEES

House Bill 96, as introduced, contained language that provided for a uniform fee for all waste disposed of at solid waste facilities and increased community engagement in the landfill

application process. Unfortunately, these provisions were removed as the House considered the budget.

The proposed changes in ORC Section 3734.57 restructured the allocation of disposal fees collected at solid waste landfills and adopted a single uniform fee collected for both solid waste and construction and demolition debris. A uniform fee will remedy the misclassification of waste which occurs due to the desire to have waste classified at a lower fee category when the waste may be a mixture of solid waste and construction debris. The greatest effect this will have in Ohio is on out-of-state waste currently logged as construction and demolition debris (C&DD) which is subject to a lower rate than solid waste.

The uniform fee set at the solid waste disposal fee level will benefit Ohioans, reducing the tendency for Ohio to be the dumping ground for the East Coast. The influx of waste from the East Coast into Ohio, driven by lower disposal fees at Ohio landfills, has had several negative effects on Ohioans. Some of these include environmental impact; community health concerns; local economic and infrastructure strain; and reputation and aesthetic concerns.

We ask that you restore the proposed language on solid waste and construction and demolition debris fees and increase community engagement to equip the local communities with consistent funds to ensure the effective management of landfills across the state of Ohio.
(Comp Doc EPACD13, EPACD15, EPACD16 and EPACD17).

I would be happy to answer any questions.

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