



**Senate Finance Committee
Substitute House Bill 96
Friendship Circle of Cleveland
Rabbi Yossi Marozov, Executive Director
Izabella Bashkin, Student
May 29, 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 Rabbi Yossi Marozov, and I am the Executive Director of Friendship Circle of Cleveland. I'm pleased to be here today to share with you the services Friendship Circle provides to children with disabilities and their families in Northeast Ohio.

For twenty-two years, Friendship Circle has been a lifeline for families raising children with disabilities. What began with a handful of children and dedicated teen volunteers has blossomed into a comprehensive network of support. Friendship Circle offers over 30 programs designed to foster social enrichment, build family networks, and provide essential family support. Hundreds of families across Northeast Ohio, from Pepper Pike in Cuyahoga County to Avon in Lorain County and Mentor in Lake County, rely on Friendship Circle as their village, their community, their source of strength.

The impact of Friendship Circle extends beyond mere programming; it's about creating a sense of belonging and empowerment. Our unique model, pairing children with disabilities with teen volunteers, cultivates genuine friendships and breaks down barriers. It fosters a culture of inclusion, and I am not sure who benefits more from this programming, the typical teen who develops empathy for others (which is so desperately needed in today's world) or the special needs child. As these teens transition to adulthood, they will go forward with a greater compassion and understanding of the challenges so many families face which cannot always be seen, felt, or heard but is always carried on the shoulders of parents.

Since Fiscal Year 2024, with \$200,000 in annual funding from the State of Ohio, Friendship Circle has experienced tremendous growth. We have introduced 12 new programs for children and families with disabilities, expanded our team by six new members, and increased the number of child participants and teen volunteers by approximately one-third.

The demand for our services continues to rise, as more families seek our support. Our current annual budget of \$2.1 million, primarily reliant on private donations and foundations, is stretched to its limits. We operate without an endowment, requiring us to rebuild our funding each year. **I respectfully request your support for a \$300,000 appropriation each fiscal year for Friendship Circle.** This funding will enable us to expand our programs to reach more families and provide a wider range of services to meet the diverse needs of our community.



Now I'd like to introduce, Izabella Bashkin, a teen volunteer to share her experience.

Hello everyone, my name is Izabella Bashkin, or Izzy. I live in Moreland Hills, and I'm a junior at Hawken School. I want to begin by saying thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here and talk about this incredible organization I'm a part of. It's truly an honor to be here today, and I'm excited to share what we do and how we make a difference in our community.

I've been a part of Friendship Circle for several years now, and it has truly become like a second home to me. Over time, I've been involved in nearly every program we offer and have hung out with almost every kid.

Some of my best friends I've met through Friendship Circle, and I'm lucky enough to hang out with them every week and throughout the summer. Whether it's at day camp, a playdate at home, or on field trips, I've never shared more laughs and smiles than I have at Friendship Circle.

Friendship isn't just important for social and cognitive growth, but it's also about feeling accepted, valued, supported, and building relationships that last a lifetime.

Now, I can't speak for the kids, but on behalf of the volunteers, Friendship Circle is by far the most fun and fulfilling experience I've ever had. Not only have I met so many wonderful and kind people, but I've grown as a person as well.

One of my favorite things about spending time with kids, whether it's at Friendship Circle or babysitting, is their honesty. They say exactly what's on their mind and are always true to themselves. I'll admit, some comments have caught me off guard, but I have so much admiration for them because of that.

Personally, I tend to be a bit of a people-pleaser and stay quiet and mold myself to the people I'm with. But it was my third day at Friendship Circle, and I started saying something but then I got self-conscious, and cut myself off. And my buddy noticed and tapped me on the shoulder, smiled, and told me to finish what I was saying. From then on, I've never felt more comfortable or welcome anywhere else.

Overall, Friendship Circle is single handedly responsible for creating an environment where strong, raw, and amazing friendships thrive, and I'm so thankful for the opportunity to be a part of it.

Thank you for considering this request. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.