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Ohio Senate Finance Committee Hearing

Friday, May 30, 2025

Interested Party Testimony

Ohio House Substitute Bill 96 – Make state operating appropriations for FY 2026-27

Shandell L. Jamal
Board Member / Program Alumna
Huckleberry House

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and distinguished members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide Interested Party testimony today on House Substitute Bill 96, the state operating budget for FY 2026-27, specifically in support of amendment SC-0446.

My name is Shandell Jamal, and I serve as a Board Member for Huckleberry House, a central Ohio nonprofit organization supporting young people ages 12 - 24 struggling with homelessness, family conflict, poverty, and violence. We provide a continuum of services, including operating a Teen Crisis Program, to address the root issues that cause youth homelessness and help at-risk young people develop independent living skills to reach their full potential.

Huckleberry House is advocating for a budget allocation of \$729,000 (\$365,000 per biennium) – initially submitted to this committee as amendment SC-0446 by Senator Craig – to support our crucial work. During a time of increased need and strained capacity, this funding would allow us to scale our Teen Crisis Program and Transitional Living Program operations to provide high-quality and high-return services to more youth across our state who are facing homelessness.

This budget investment would support the organization's tailored, one-on-one care with the youth we serve through our Teen Crisis and Transitional Housing Programs, and it will provide a high return on investment for our state. Research demonstrates that investment in homelessness prevention programs reduces government spending across medical and behavioral health care systems, criminal and legal systems, and publicly funded wraparound services.

Huckleberry House is an organization near and dear to my heart – not only because of its mission and impact, but also because of my lived experience as a Huckleberry House alumna. 25 years ago, Huckleberry House was a safe place for me. 25 years ago, I was an honors student in high school faced with significant challenges at home that seemed insurmountable at the time. 25 years ago, Huckleberry House made investments in preserving my safety and provided hope, stability, and the care I needed. Today, we are asking that you choose to invest in the future of vulnerable Ohio youth by making an investment whose ROI will last far more than 25 years. Our programs provide supportive services that help youth not only stabilize their lives, but thrive.

I know firsthand that Huckleberry House's programs work – through the value of lived experience in the program, and now as a Board Member. The investments in my future still yield an incredible ROI today – inspiring a career in public and nonprofit service at the local, state, and federal levels advocating for youth and families. Huckleberry House has become a part of my “why” – and the investments they continue to make into young people facing challenges will continue to demonstrate an ROI beyond the now.

My story represents one of the many success stories of the undeniable impact of Huckleberry House. It is a privilege to speak with you about an organization that has, and will continue to have, a significant impact on not only me, but on hundreds of central Ohio youth. The staff, volunteers, and Board members that serve our organization would agree that it is an honor to serve and invest in our mission of instilling hope and providing resources to support youth success. Today, we are kindly asking you to join us in our efforts by making a significant investment in the youth and communities we serve by including and approving our budget allocation. This will allow us to expand and strengthen our Teen Crisis and Transitional Living programs that provide shelter, behavioral healthcare services and compassionate care.

As this Committee continues deliberations on the budget bill, we respectfully urge you to support amendment SC-0446 to build capacity for Huckleberry House's services. The state's investing in our organization will make a lasting impact on the lives of Ohio's youth and families, supporting our ability to scale operations of our Teen Crisis Program, which provides lifesaving support and transformative opportunities for youth in Ohio who are facing challenging circumstances, including homelessness.

Shandell L. Jamal