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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

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Title: Director of Residential Programs

Organization: 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 Amanda Leclerc, and I serve as the Director of Residential Programs for Huckleberry House. Huckleberry House is 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 and Shelter, and Transitional Living 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 Program, 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.

Every day, Huckleberry House serves displaced young people due to family conflict, abuse, poverty, or systemic barriers. Without immediate access to safe housing, these youth face heightened risks of exploitation, substance abuse, and mental health crises. Our shelter and housing programs provides not only a roof over their heads but also individualized support services, case management, educational support and pathways to long-term housing stability. Without increased funding, too many young people will be without the support they desperately need.

In the fall, a female entered the crisis program several months away from her 18th birthday. Her father was her guardian and her mother had died two years earlier. The youth had bounced between placements with her father, who struggled with substance abuse, and her adult brother's home. She reported feeling depressed and sometimes suicidal due to losing her mom. She felt like there was no one who really wanted her. She reported both missing her mom, but struggling with the negative memories of her mom abusing drugs.

The youth had been homeless before several years earlier with her mother. She expressed trying counseling before, but she stopped going because transportation was a barrier, and she did not have any family that supported her treatment. She stated that she was a senior in high school, but that the last few years in school were a struggle. She identified wanting to graduate and make something of herself. Children Services was involved in the case due to no safe housing options in the family.

In order to have the youth complete high school in Columbus, the youth was placed in our Transitional Living Program rather than an out-of-county children services group home. She is in school, participating in counseling, and thriving in her independent living situation. She is learning to deal with disappointments. Although she will not graduate in May, she is enrolled in summer school and will graduate with a high school diploma in August. She still struggles with the loss of relationships, but she is building a new support network within her youth housing community.

On behalf of the youth we serve, I urge you to fund these essential programs. Our state has the opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to the most vulnerable members of community and ensure that no young person is left without a safe place to call home.

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.

Amanda Leclerc