



Senate Finance Committee

Proponent Testimony of Kari Jones, President & CEO, ElevateDD

May 30, 2025

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Kari Jones, and I am the President & CEO of ElevateDD, a statewide advocacy platform dedicated to increasing authentic inclusion for people with developmental disabilities by amplifying voices, supporting families, illuminating opportunities, and launching innovative solutions.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today on the proposed investments in House Bill 96 and the urgent need to improve services and support for people with developmental disabilities in Ohio. At ElevateDD, our work spans decades of advocacy, education, and systems change aimed at improving the lives of individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. We are committed to addressing the full spectrum of challenges, from accessing quality education and care to ensuring authentic inclusion and opportunity in every part of community life.

In our field, there is a phrase and sentiment that drives advocacy and leadership among people with developmental disabilities and their families, "Nothing about us, without us." Efforts to reintroduce language acknowledging Supported Decision-Making as a path for families also recognize the need to educate more Ohioans on this option. Requested by people with developmental disabilities as well as advocates, this approach allows for more independence while providing for support when needed. Like DODD, ElevateDD respects the use of guardianship when necessary while also providing education about alternative plans. Please support amendment SC1002 to restore the language from the as-introduced bill to recognize supported decision-making in Ohio law.

Supporting the critical workforce of Direct Service Providers benefits families in our community. Direct Support Professionals are essential members of care teams, and they should be fairly compensated for the critical role they play within our system of care. We appreciated the efforts to ensure increased wages for the Direct Support Professionals within the last state budget and appreciate the continued and critical investment for the next biennium budget. For many with developmental disabilities, community access and authentic inclusion could not be achieved without Direct Support Professionals.

Child care is an economic necessity that allows families to work, contribute to their communities, and provide stability for their children. Yet, families of children with disabilities face systemic barriers when seeking care, leading to financial strain, career disruptions, and negative impacts on family well-being.

According to our recent study surveying 768 families in Ohio:

- More than 50% of surveyed families experienced job disruptions or missed career advancement opportunities due to child care restrictions.
- More than 60% of families with children in paid child care reported being told that providers could not accommodate their child due to behavioral, medical, toileting, or physical needs.
- 62% of families who could not place their child in child care cited the inability to find a provider capable of meeting their child's needs as the primary reason.

These are not just numbers, they represent real families forced to make difficult choices. Families who must reduce work hours, leave the workforce entirely, or endure financial hardship because they cannot find or afford appropriate care for their children. We believe that increasing the threshold for Publicly Funded Child Care to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level for families whose children have disabilities is critical in providing recognition and access to families who need it most.

It is critical that children with disabilities continue to receive enhanced eligibility. Families caring for children with disabilities experience significantly increased financial burdens associated with therapies, medical care, and specialized services. Maintaining higher eligibility for this population recognizes these unique challenges.

Additionally, Governor DeWine's child care voucher program, introduced earlier in 2024, extends support to families up to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. However, this program does not include designated slots for children with disabilities. We strongly urge the committee to establish reserved slots to ensure these children do not continue to be disproportionately excluded from child care services.

Furthermore, Ohio's Child Care Development Fund Plan is currently out of compliance with federal requirements because it does not provide targeted grants or contracts for children with disabilities. Ensuring compliance with these federal standards is an opportunity to increase access and create a more accessible child care system that serves all Ohio families.

Our survey and community engagement efforts make one thing clear: families are the best source of information on the challenges they face. Their voices must shape policy decisions. Consider these firsthand accounts from parents navigating Ohio's child care system:



- "We try to work opposite shifts, which negatively impacts our marriage."
- "Between hospitalizations and appointments, jobs have fired me or let me go."
- "I owned my own successful business, but I had to close it due to lack of child care options."

These stories are not exceptions; they are the unrelenting reality that many Ohio families face every day.

Ohio can improve its child care system. We have a unique opportunity to lead in ensuring child care is accessible, inclusive, and equitable for all children, including those with disabilities. We urge Ohio to:

1. Maintain enhanced child care eligibility for children with disabilities.
2. Establish designated slots for children with disabilities in state-supported child care programs.
3. Address Ohio's compliance gap by providing targeted grants and contracts for infants, children in underserved areas, and children with disabilities.

We appreciate your time and attention to these issues. Thank you for your leadership, interest, and commitment to Ohio's developmental disabilities community.

Kari Jones  
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ElevateDD

