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## Committees

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Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and esteemed members of the Senate Finance Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to present testimony in support of Senate Bill 177, which aims to establish the Workforce Investment Now (WIN) for Child Care pilot program.

This legislation addresses a pressing and growing issue in Ohio: the significant shortage of qualified childcare workers. In recent years, childcare providers have faced substantial challenges in hiring and retaining staff. Consequently, many centers have been compelled to reduce their classroom capacity or even close their doors, limiting the options available to working families and placing additional strain on our state's labor force participation.

According to the Ohio Chamber of Commerce's Blueprint for Ohio's Economic Future, our state remains short about 62,000 workers to reach pre-pandemic employment levels. By investing in childcare workers, we enhance opportunities for everyone. When childcare staff are employed, it allows the rest of us to work. To provide some context, from 2017 to 2023, the number of child care workers in Ohio decreased by nearly 32%, with the most significant drop — around 5,000 workers — occurring between 2019 and 2020. Unfortunately, many communities in Ohio have not bounced back from that decline.

The average hourly wage for a childcare worker in Ohio stands at \$13.44, translating to about \$27,960 annually for those working full-time. In contrast, the median hourly wage for all workers in Ohio is \$23.95, with 13.3% of the population living in poverty. The pandemic led to a loss of one-third of the childcare workforce, and recovery has been slow. A robust and sustainable childcare workforce is essential for the overall recovery of our state's economy. Childcare professionals are crucial to economic growth, yet they often receive inadequate support.

Under this pilot program, the Department of Children and Youth will manage the initiative during fiscal years 2026 and 2027. A childcare worker is eligible for this pilot program either by income eligibility OR if they work a minimum of 20 hours a week. Essentially, this means that those who care for other families' children will finally have access to affordable care for their own children.

To fund this initiative, the bill allocates \$20 million from the General Revenue Funds for the fiscal year 2026. Any funds that remain unspent by the end of that year will be available for use in fiscal year 2027. Once the program concludes, the Department of Children and Youth will present its findings and outcomes to the Governor and the General Assembly.

The primary objectives of this pilot program are twofold: first, to help retain current childcare workers by alleviating one of their most substantial personal expenses; and second, to attract new professionals to the field.

Senate Bill 177 adopts a practical, data-driven approach, testing a specific strategy aimed at addressing a workforce shortage that impacts not only the childcare sector but the economy of Ohio as a whole. Should the pilot prove successful, the insights gained could guide future investments and policy reforms statewide.

In closing, members of the committee, childcare is a vital component of our infrastructure, both for working families and the overall strength of our state's economy. However, we cannot address Ohio's workforce challenges without first tackling the workforce hurdles faced by the childcare sector. The WIN for Child Care pilot is a strategic, innovative step toward that goal.

Thank you for your consideration, and I welcome any questions you may have.