

TESTIMONY PRESENTED  
BY:  
W. Craig Zimpher, Chair  
State Employment Relations Board

BEFORE:  
Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee

April 30, 2025

Chair Manchester and members of the Committee, good morning. I am Craig Zimpher, Chair of the State Employment Relations Board, or SERB; I'm pleased and honored to be with you today to discuss the proposed biennial budget for SERB. SERB exercises jurisdiction over all aspects of Ohio's public sector collective bargaining process; our mission is to effect the efficient, fair, and objective administration and adjudication of the collective bargaining process. 2024 marked SERB's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The Administration's proposed budget will provide for SERB to maintain existing levels of service; we have not requested funding for any additional programs, projects, etc. Indeed, the proposed increases in SERB's GRF budget (3.6% in FY 26 and 2.7% in FY 27) will merely allow us to maintain current operations and staffing levels. These modest increases will simply cover the general wage increases negotiated by the State of Ohio (4.5% in FY26 and 3% in FY 27) and predictable increases to the costs of office space, supplies and basic services.

In performing their duties, and achieving our mission, SERB's associates, themselves, developed a statement of culture, reflective of how we will achieve that mission, and which states:

- Integrity and objectivity in the way we conduct ourselves;
- Teamwork as we act with civility and mutual respect, towards achieving the common goal of our Mission;
- Greatness achieved by never compromising our work, providing excellent performance in serving our stakeholders, and pursuing continual improvements; and
- Sharing and celebrating in each other's successes and viewing challenges as opportunities.

SERB's principal mission is to facilitate and promote orderly and constructive labor relations for our public employers, and state and local public employees; this mission must be understood to reflect the interests of all parties. SERB serves as the neutral, objective mediator or arbiter of matters arising in the collective bargaining process. The following numbers might illustrate the extent of collective bargaining throughout our state: 332,209 public employees are covered by 1,546 negotiated contracts, throughout each of our 88 counties. SERB's 2024 Annual Report, which is attached, provides a county breakdown. Most importantly, however, our statutory mission of promoting orderly and constructive labor/management relations is designed to mitigate conflict through negotiation, mediation, fact-finding and impartial adjudication.

SERB's responsibilities include investigating and adjudicating unfair labor practice charges, determining the size and appropriateness of bargaining units, conducting union representation elections, and providing the parties in more than 1,000 collective bargaining negotiations annually with comparative wage, benefits, and contract data. The Bureau of Mediation serves the critical function of assisting employers and employees in negotiations, to avoid work stoppages and, to resolve or reconcile charges of unfair labor practices. During the past year our mediators have engaged in 61 mediation sessions involving the negotiation of 43 collective bargaining agreements.

During the last ten years, we have implemented several processes designed to reduce the friction costs of adjudication. One hundred and eighty-one Unfair Labor Practice charges and 225 union representation requests were filed with SERB in the last year. The resolution of these cases requires thorough investigation, review and analysis by our professional Investigations staff. I believe all labor/management stakeholders would agree that, given the regulatory and practical requirements inherent in a fair and thorough review, our "delivery" timeframes are in the "best practices" category. The Board finds probable cause to warrant a hearing in approximately 6-7% of the cases. However, we require the parties to enter into a mediation process prior to the commencement of a formal, litigious, and often expensive hearing process. 57% of such referrals have produced a reconciliation of the issues; thereby avoiding the expenses of litigation.

In meeting these objectives, we are absolutely committed to managing the agency in the most frugal and prudent manner possible.

Throughout the previous several biennia, SERB has proactively managed our budget challenges and maintained successful levels of service. Efficiencies have been realized by:

- Expanding use of personal service and intermittent contracts for Administrative Law Judges and Mediators;
- Discontinuing the production of hearing transcripts in all cases except those that are required by the Courts or specifically requested by the parties;
- Moving toward other paperless operations including: transmitting internal reports electronically, submitting investigation requests electronically, and using electronic correspondence wherever else appropriate;
- Engaging in a Kaizen event to identify changes and create efficiencies within SERB's Representation processes;
- Implementing electronic contract filings on a voluntary basis, thereby saving significant staff time required to scan those documents;
- Gaining statutory authority to conduct mail-ballot representation elections instead of on-site elections;
- Eliminating travel reimbursement except for Mediators.

Public and labor/management stakeholder outreach, education, and training remain a very important priority for SERB. Annually, we offer a "SERB Academy," a two-day in-person training program dedicated to introducing labor and management practitioners with a practical and beneficial program consisting of both the legal, regulatory, and very practical aspects of contract negotiations. Firefighters, police officers, educators and other public service employees and their managers or supervisors from every county in Ohio participate in these programs. In the last four years alone over 2,600 Ohioans from each of your Districts have attended a SERB or State Personnel Board of Review seminar. We will also continue, for the thirty-second year, to publish the very widely utilized *Report on the Cost of Health Insurance in Ohio's Public Sector*. This

report is an analysis of employee health insurance plans offered by Ohio's public employers. A copy of the most recent issue is also attached. Equally important is the maintenance of perhaps the country's most comprehensive data system that contains data from all current and historic collective bargaining agreements in Ohio. This database is heavily utilized by practitioners, with about 206,000 annual visits. It is widely recognized to be the "Best of Practice" model nationally. It enables our staff to prepare an average of 1,000 specialized reports annually.

The FY 2026/2027 budget as presented by the Executive Branch, essentially a "status quo" budget, will allow SERB to continue to:

- Present Unfair Labor Practice cases to the Board within 60 days of filing;
- Place representation cases on the Board agenda well within our target of 180 days of filing;
- Support proactive mediation to intervene where/when necessary and appropriate in contract negotiations or other labor/management situations to avoid work stoppage or other issues;
- Continue to provide timely and responsive reports to stakeholder requests for information and analysis related to the collective bargaining process;
- Allow SERB to continue educational and training programs for labor/management stakeholders.

When SERB was established in 1984, there were 51 full-time employees. Those early years were reflective of a time when office practices were paper driven, no computers, no "cut and paste" word processing and limited electronic resources. Over time, SERB created electronic and other office efficiencies resulting in a 53% reduction in staffing from 1984 to the present staffing level of twenty-four (24). SERB has demonstrated a commitment to service, stewardship and prudent expense management, and will certainly continue to do so.

Chair Manchester and members, this concludes my testimony; I very much appreciate your attention and courtesy and would be happy to respond to any questions.

Thank you.