



Ohio Department of Children and Youth
Senate Health Committee Testimony
Fiscal Years 2026–2027 Budget Request
May 8, 2025

Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. It's an honor to present the Ohio Department of Children and Youth's budget request for Fiscal Years 2026 and 2027.

Two years ago, Governor Mike DeWine and the General Assembly launched DCY with a simple but powerful mission: **DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR KIDS**. That principle is more than a motto — it drives every decision we make.

From the start, we've made it a priority to listen closely to those we serve. Through listening sessions, surveys, and conversations with more than 700 youth, parents, and caregivers, we have shaped our work around real-world needs — not assumptions.

Systemic change isn't easy, and it isn't fast. But thanks to the determination of our team, the strength of our partnerships, and the unwavering focus on outcomes, we are seeing real, measurable progress. Together, we are advancing the three goals we set when DCY was created: **reducing infant mortality, improving kindergarten readiness, and keeping families safely together**.

We are also committed to transparency, accountability, and efficiency in everything we do. DCY was built by bringing together functions from five state agencies — originally totaling 674 positions. Today, we are fully operational with 600 positions and have identified further opportunities to consolidate and streamline, targeting an additional reduction of 36 positions without compromising service quality.

At every step, our focus remains the same: **achieving better outcomes for Ohio's children and families**.

Goal 1: Giving Every Baby a Fighting Chance

In late 2024, Ohio reached a powerful milestone: our infant mortality rate fell to 6.6 per 1,000 live births, the lowest in two decades. That means 70 more babies made it to their first birthdays than the year before — enough to fill four kindergarten classrooms.



This progress didn't happen by chance. It happened because Ohio made smart, targeted investments and listened to what families told us they needed.

In Hamilton County, the Cradle Cincinnati initiative has helped reduce infant mortality by 30 percent in just 20 months – one of the most dramatic turnarounds in the state. With support from our *Partners for Change* grant, we are now helping scale this proven, community-led model in Cuyahoga, Franklin, Lucas, and Montgomery counties where nearly half of all infant deaths in Ohio occur.

We're also strengthening support for fathers through the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood and expanding resources for Parenting and Pregnancy Centers. Research shows what families already know: when fathers are supported and engaged, outcomes improve for moms, babies, and the whole family.

Home visiting remains one of our most impactful tools. This budget allows us to reach 25,000 more children and bring *Family Connects Ohio* to all 88 counties. A single registered nurse visit within weeks of birth can cut emergency room visits in half, lower rates of postpartum depression by 30 percent, and significantly increase family connection to local supports.

With continued investment, we estimate we can save 330 babies each year — nearly one baby every day. To make that happen, we're requesting an additional \$53 million across the biennium to grow these life-saving programs.

Goal 2: Giving Every Child a Strong Start

But our work doesn't stop at birth. Giving every baby a fighting chance must be matched by giving every child a strong start.

Today, only one in three Ohio children enter kindergarten fully prepared. For Black and Hispanic children, it's fewer than one in five. We know early learning opportunities change this trajectory.

Governor DeWine's budget proposal makes bold investments in early care and education: expanding access to child care for working families and the Child Care Choice Voucher Program, capping child care co-pays at 7 percent of family income, and raising provider reimbursement rates to reflect market realities.

Already, the Child Care Choice program has connected 8,000 additional children to high-quality early learning in just over a year, and helped 5,300 families enter or grow their role in the workforce.



We're aligning early learning with the Science of Reading to build strong foundations and using tools like the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment to transparently measure success. With these efforts, we project that kindergarten readiness rates could rise from 36 percent to 60 percent over the next two years and that 25,000 families will be able to return to school or work or expand their hours.

Safe, affordable child care is not a luxury. It is essential to Ohio's families and to Ohio's economy.

Goal 3: Keeping Families Safely Together

We are also making real strides in keeping families safely together.

Since December 2019, Ohio has reduced the number of children in foster care from 16,455 to 14,213 — the lowest level since 2016. But far too many families still fracture simply because they lack support.

This budget invests in prevention and family stability. We are requesting \$45 million in SFY 2026 and \$40 million in SFY 2027 to support new Child Wellness Campuses, regional centers where children in crisis can be served closer to home. We are also requesting continued investment in the State Child Protection Allocation to support local children services agencies facing increased costs and caseloads.

These strategies are grounded in the recommendations of the Children Services Transformation Advisory Council and enjoy strong support from the Public Children Services Association of Ohio and the County Commissioners Association of Ohio.

Governor DeWine knows that when families are strong, children are safer and communities are stronger. His budget recognizes that strengthening families is essential to achieving all of DCY's goals: giving every baby a fighting chance, preparing every child for success in school, and keeping families safely together. That's why the Governor is also advancing a bold proposal to support working families with young children through the creation of a Family Tax Cut: a \$1,000 per child benefit for children under the age of seven.

Structured to reward work, the Family Tax Cut ensures that even a single parent working full time at minimum wage can receive the full benefit for each eligible young child. At a time when the cost of raising young children is rising — from diapers and groceries to child care — this proposal recognizes the real financial pressures families face. It's a practical, pro-family, pro-



work policy that strengthens parents' ability to provide for their children and continue building a stronger future for themselves and for Ohio.

Smart Investments, Preserving Momentum

As you know, families are the foundation of safe, thriving communities. When we invest in them, especially those working hard to give their children a strong start, we're not just improving individual lives — we're strengthening Ohio's future.

Thanks to your leadership, we're seeing measurable progress across the state. But we can't afford to lose ground. This is the time to keep moving forward — to continue backing the families doing all they can to raise healthy kids and build a better life.

Together, we can ensure every baby has a chance to thrive, every child enters school ready to learn, and every family has the support they need to succeed.

I look forward to building on this momentum together and working with all of you to DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR KIDS in Ohio.