



**STATEMENT OF THE GRIT (Growing Rural Independence Together) Grassroots Coalition
In Support of the GRIT Amendment # on Matter of Biennium Budget Funding**
Senator Stephen Huffman – Chair

Chairman Huffman, Vice Chairmen Johnson, Ranking Member Liston and Members of the Senate Health Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the positive impact of the GRIT Project, and the need for continued funding.

Who We Are: I am Denise Reading, a co-founders and steering committee member of the grassroots coalition known to you as the GRIT Project. In collaboration with my colleague and members of the GRIT grassroots coalition we are here to share with you the positive impact GRIT is having on the Appalachian region of Ohio. The GRIT grassroots coalition is made up of literally hundreds of community leaders representing K-12 schools, higher education, workforce investment boards, OhioMeansJobs, chambers, businesses, economic development, treatment providers, corrections, courts, churches and numerous other organizations who are committed to building a better future for the citizens of Appalachia and therefore the State of Ohio. GRIT represents the 32 Counties of Appalachia, stretching from Clermont to Ashtabula and other “like” rural counties in the State.

Funding History: Today, we would like to start by thanking the Senate for your continued support of what started with funding in the 2019-21 State budget to support a small pilot in Adams, Brown, Pike, Highland and Scioto Counties to create pathways for economic opportunity for individuals and economic recovery for their communities, and through continued funding in both the 21-23 & 23-25 biennium budgets, continuing awards based on our successful performance, has spread to all 32 counties of Appalachian Ohio and several other like counties.

Select Outcomes: The seamless continuation of funding from the State of Ohio, has allowed the GRIT grassroots coalition to reach a tipping point in shifting the opportunity mindset of Appalachia by supporting individuals and communities in taking ownership for their futures as it relates to **building prosperity vs accepting poverty** as a way of life. As a part of the GRIT approach, we utilize a 5-Step Process supported by the community-based grassroots coalitions. We have been able to assess and coach over 26,000 youth and adults (steps 1 & 2) and support those participants through the additional three steps of discovery, preparation and placement. Through this process, we have built a pre-qualified data base of workers for both Appalachia and the State of Ohio.

The Impact of GRIT on Health & Wellbeing: Because we are testifying before the Senate Health Committee, we will focus our remarks on what the data from the assessment and coaching tells us about the potential workforce and how that connects to the health and wellbeing of Ohio citizens. Of the 26,000 assessed and coached youth and adults, approximately **25% have both the aptitude and the interest in the health sciences and approximately 7+% have both the interest and the aptitude for Human Services, so 8,320 individuals are both pre-qualified** and have indicated a desire to fill jobs



in health care and behavioral health roles. Yet, according to the Rural Health Information Hub, **every county in Appalachia Ohio has a critical healthcare worker shortage and 29 of 32 counties have a critical behavioral health worker shortage.** If we just look at data for the Southeast Region produced by Jobs Ohio, which covers 26 of the GRIT counties, the region will need 4850 workers in these fields by 2030. For example, we need 1,924 Home Health and Personal Care Aides, 498 Registered Nurses and 151 additional Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses, but we also know we need 155 fewer Nursing Assistants. Based on our data, **we do not have a talent gap for Healthcare and Behavioral care jobs, but we do have an exposure and access to education gap.** To close this gap, GRIT has successfully been working in the field to create access to both discovery and education programs to close the gap. GRIT has:

- Worked with the Career & Technical Schools, Community Colleges, Higher Education Institutions and Private Education Providers to assure that their recruiting efforts reach the students who are a match to the opportunities. Working with the Appalachian Children’s Coalition and Ohio University, we filled the seats in the State supported initiative to fill the pipeline for students pursuing social work degrees.
- Worked collaboratively with K12 Innovation Center grant recipients and design firms to design centers where student strengths and industry needs intersect providing state of the art facilities designed to support personalized career pathway opportunities. *With us today to share more is Terri Bennet, GRIT/Future Plans, Workforce Credentials Coordinator.*
- Used previous funding to open shared workforce centers in geographically isolated areas to create access to high-speed internet so that students and their parents or guardians can connect to online or virtual education programs or traveling programs in Adams, Brown and Pike counties. As a result, **adults in Adams County can now participate in healthcare related certification training programs in West Union.** Universities and Community Colleges are bringing the programs from their campuses to the communities who need them most.
- Increased summer Healthcare Credentialing Bootcamps, in our GRIT funded career camps, from 0 to 6, where graduating high school seniors without a post-graduation plan, participate in a summer credentialing program based on their assessment/coaching data. This past summer, **85% of all participants in the program past the credentialing exams and were placed in a health care job.** *With us today is Haley Thompson from Ashtabula County to share the impact that the GRIT Summer Program had on her life.*
- Supported “home schools” in creating new learning blocks to support workforce development like Belpre High Schools workforce Friday where 10 students, participated in health field certification training programs in STNA in collaboration with Washington County Career Center Adult Tech. who adapted their teaching schedule to enable student access.
- Supported the “recovery” community and treatment providers in reducing recidivism by providing the capacity building and technical support to incorporate workforce development into their treatment plan. This approach supports individuals in recovery in gaining/regaining



their sense of purpose by aligning their assessment data to good jobs and these good jobs give participants the opportunity to make new friends and develop a new community of peer support. Both national and state research indicates that a sense of purpose and a new community of support are two of the three most significant treatment interventions related to the reduction of recidivism. *With us today, from the Electrical Trades Academy Apprenticeship Program we have Matt Louangloth and Crystal Keaton, Workforce Area 1 to testify.*

- Piloted the HealthCorp program in nine geographically isolated school districts to both increase wellness awareness and education and to also, create exposure to the careers related to wellness and healthcare. **87% of HealthCorp participants report that they changed at least one health related behavior, and 97% of youth mentors reported a direct connection to their professional development.**

A Chicken and the Egg Outcome: Our partnership with HealthCorp, helped those of us supporting the GRIT Project examine the chicken and the egg question when it comes to the health and wellness of Appalachia. For individuals to work, they must be well and for people to be well, they need to work to have the financial ability to access healthy food, exist trauma, seek preventative healthcare, etc. We concluded that you have to work to be healthy and you have to be healthy to work. The data we have shared related to Health Care exist for every industry sector and every participant. Whether healthcare, the skilled trades or manufacturing, work matters. It not only creates individual and community prosperity, but it also saves the State money. **Research shows that Youth living in regions of gross adult unemployment will perceive that “the” future, “their” future will be exactly the same as their parents, friends, and family members and this contributes to a culture of hopelessness.** A lack of exposure reinforces these feelings. Lost hope has:

- Been the root cause that allowed the opioid epidemic to ravage the Appalachian region
- Increased the percentage of the region who has been incarcerated
- Exploded the need for foster care
- Impacted the high school graduation rate.

Each of these outcomes of lost hope, is also a barrier to work and an almost guarantee of a life dependent on the system for basic survival or life in the system through incarceration. The GRIT Project is saving the State of Ohio money by restoring hope through work and purposefulness. *Testimony from Brock Brewster, Superintendent of the Western Local School District.*

Conclusion: Supporting individuals in gaining meaningful work is critical to the success of the individual, the community and to the State of Ohio. It is critical because our economy demands it. It is also critical because, without work, the personal cost to our communities is too great. From our initial pilot to today, The GRI Project has proven our ability to support both youth and adults in getting on a career pathway that results in living wage jobs. We have a **14% better job placement rate** for underemployed and unemployed adults than the rest of the State. We have a **25% higher placement**



rate for displaced workers. We have **supported 90 schools** in building a career pathway program. We have supported numerous employers in filling their jobs. That is why the **County Commissioners Association of Ohio, The Ohio Educational Service Centers Association, the Association of Workforce Boards, and Ohio Excels – The Business Round Table** have all submitted their support of the GRIT Project. Based on our past success in being good stewards of the State’s fund, we are asking the Senate to continue the funding of the GRIT Project through your support to amend GRF ALI 600450, Program Operations, by \$6,500,000 in each fiscal year. Increase the amount earmarked in ALI 600450 for the GRIT Program by that same amount (from \$5,000,000 in each fiscal year to \$11,500,000 in each fiscal year).