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An Ashtabula County Technical & Career Center Program
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Tutoring, Alternative, Education, Skill Training & Work Experiences

Written testimonial to the Ohio Senate

Re: The GRIT (Growing Rural Independence Together) Project in Ashtabula County and Statewide Impact

Submitted by: Shaelynn Ballard, Special Grants Manager Ashtabula County Technical & Career Center

Date: 4/29/2025

Dear Chairman Huffman and Members of the Senate Health Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding the Growing Rural Independence Together (GRIT) Project and the tremendous impact it has made in Ashtabula County and across Appalachian and rural Ohio. GRIT is not just a workforce initiative—it is a grassroots movement committed to economic mobility, community empowerment, and long-term prosperity for the people of our state.

GRIT Ashtabula has served as a local model of this larger vision. In just 12 months, the GRIT funding has enabled us to provide more than 800 individuals with the Future Plans Assessment and career coaching, connecting them to training and employment pathways that align with their skills and passions. More than 200 individuals have received assistance to complete in-demand training such as CDL, CNA, and phlebotomy—with a 90% successful completion rate. More than 50 individuals have received critical support services such as transportation, uniforms, and childcare, leading to sustainable employment.

One of the most significant local achievements through GRIT was the implementation of evening public transportation services, a solution that had been discussed for more than 20 years but never realized—until now. In less than a year, GRIT convened community partners and delivered a service that now connects residents to second-shift jobs and evening education opportunities, dramatically expanding access and equity in a rural area where mobility was a top barrier.

GRIT Ashtabula has served a wide cross-section of residents: youth ages 16–24, adults seeking higher wages, individuals experiencing homelessness, people in recovery, and those with prior justice involvement. One woman who completed her CDL training through GRIT said it best: *“I never knew that this was truly possible for me. I am 53 years old, I never thought I would be successful—and now here I am, reaching my dreams.”*

As powerful as the local story is, GRIT is not limited to one county. The GRIT grassroots coalition includes hundreds of community leaders from across the state representing K-12 education, higher education, workforce investment boards, OhioMeansJobs, businesses, chambers, economic development agencies, courts, treatment providers, churches, and more. These leaders are united by a shared goal: building a better future for the citizens of all 32 Appalachian counties in Ohio- from Clermont to Ashtabula- as well as several “like” rural counties beyond.

GRIT began with funding in the 2019–21 state budget as a pilot in five southern counties (Adams, Brown, Pike, Highland, and Scioto), and due to its demonstrated success and continued legislative support in the 2021–23 and



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2023–25 biennia, it has grown to reach tens of thousands of individuals. In fact, GRIT has now assessed and coached more than 26,000 youth and adults statewide. These individuals have gone through a structured 5-Step GRIT process that moves them from assessment to preparation and placement, resulting in a pre-qualified database of workers ready to meet Ohio’s labor force needs.

As we appear before the Senate Health Committee, it is important to emphasize GRIT’s contribution to Ohio’s health and behavioral health workforce pipeline. Among the 26,000 participants assessed to date, approximately 25% have the aptitude and interest in health sciences, and another 7% in human services. That equates to more than 8,300 individuals who are both pre-qualified and eager to pursue careers in these critical fields.

Yet, as reported by the Rural Health Information Hub, every Appalachian county in Ohio is facing a critical shortage of healthcare professionals, and 29 of 32 counties are facing behavioral health workforce shortages. In the Southeast JobsOhio Region alone (which includes 26 GRIT counties), we will need an additional 4,850 healthcare workers by 2030.

GRIT is uniquely positioned to close this gap by connecting individuals with the desire, ability, and support they need to thrive in these professions—especially in underserved rural areas where the need is greatest.

The seamless continuation of funding from the Ohio General Assembly has made this work possible, enabling GRIT to reach a tipping point in changing the “opportunity mindset” of rural Ohio. Instead of accepting poverty as a way of life, individuals are choosing to build prosperity—for themselves, their families, and their communities.

In closing, we respectfully thank the Ohio Senate for its vision and support. The GRIT Project is proof that when we invest in people and in place-based solutions, the results are life-changing—and state-shaping.

With gratitude,

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