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Cheryl Subler, Executive Director

Senate Health Committee

House Bill 96 – Interested Party Testimony

Kathryn Whittington, Ashtabula County Commissioner

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Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Senate Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on House Bill 96 on behalf of the County Commissioners Association of Ohio (CCAO). My name is Kathryn Whittington and I currently serve as an Ashtabula County Commissioner and as Chair of the CCAO Human Services Committee.

Counties are true partners of the state, especially in the delivery of our human services programs. Our departments and local boards serve everyone from children to seniors and are pivotal in serving families during challenging times. Through collaboration and innovation, counties increasingly focus on addressing the root causes of crises to truly set families on the path to self-sufficiency, break the cycle of dependence, and reduce the need for more costly interventions.

Today you will hear from Ross County Commissioner Jack Everson regarding the child welfare placement crisis. CCAO remains supportive of these critical investments in placement costs and regional child wellness campuses, and policy changes aimed at transparency and predictability in costs to our counties included in HB 96.

Counties are committed to fostering self-sufficient, healthy families through programs provided by our job and family services (JFS) agencies, including administering the state's publicly funded child care system. As such, counties are uniquely positioned to recognize both the current challenges many families have accessing child care and the positive impact that child care can have on a family's journey toward economic prosperity.

CCAO supports the Governor's proposal to increase the eligibility of publicly funded child care to 160% of the federal poverty level in House Bill 96, and the continuation of the Child Care Choice Voucher Program for families up to 200% of the federal poverty level. Removing this barrier will provide better outcomes for working families, businesses, and the overall economy. Additionally, CCAO supports efforts to build child care capacity to address the unique needs of infants, toddlers and children.

The House Passed version of HB 96 includes a provision that would allow a board of county commissioners to abolish their Family and Children First Council (FCFC). CCAO is opposed to this policy change. FCFCs serve multi-system youth and their families and provide a vital system of care in our counties. The councils serve many families, even if they are not Medicaid eligible. CCAO asks for your support of amendment SC-0315 to remove this provision.



Our county JFS agencies administer many public assistance programs, including food assistance, TANF, and Medicaid. House Bill 96 changes how often SNAP recipients report adjustments in income or other circumstances to the county JFS agency. These reporting requirements increase bureaucracy in the SNAP program and place an unfunded mandate on counties. The administrative work will require an additional 900 county caseworkers to be hired at a cost of over \$66 million per year, split evenly between the state and federal governments. CCAO asks for your support of amendment SC-0315 to remove this provision.

Costs of administration have increased over the last decade while county operating dollar allocations have largely remained flat, resulting in roughly \$25 million lost in purchasing power annually. CCAO supports additional dollars for JFS administration to provide transformational casework for our clients. CCAO also supports additional dollars for the administration of the SNAP Employment & Training Program, which would allow counties to enhance the program to allow it to be a true path toward self-sufficiency for individuals receiving public assistance.

In 2024, commissioners administered roughly \$39 million in Healthy Aging Grants designed to help Ohioans age in place and delay the transition to institutional care. These grants were wildly successful in our communities, providing much needed flexible dollars to provide nutrition services, home repairs, transportation, community resources, and more. CCAO supports additional investment in the Department of Aging's Senior Community Services line item to direct more dollars to our counties to foster increased independence and a high quality of life for our seniors. Additionally, CCAO supports the increase in funding for county JFS agencies to administer the adult protective services program.

All child support cases in the state of Ohio are administered at the county level. Our county child support enforcement agencies operate one of the most cost-effective programs in the nation, collecting \$4.58 for children for every \$1 spent on the program. Additionally, under Title IV-D, the federal government reimburses states \$2 for every \$3 the state spends on eligible program costs for providing child support services. Costs continue to rise and flat funding results in decreased purchasing power for our agencies. CCAO supports additional investment in the county allocation to enable counties to tailor services to their local needs.

House Bill 96 proposes reimagining the funding streams for local Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health (ADAMH) Boards. The six proposed block grants are designed to streamline the funding to ADAMH boards in the areas of Prevention, Mental Health, Substance Use Disorder, Crisis, Recovery Supports, and Criminal Justice. This added flexibility is crucial to building out the continuum of care in our communities. CCAO supports the proposed block grants.

As you discuss the priorities for Ohio's operating budget for this biennium, CCAO respectfully asks the General Assembly to consider and preserve these investments in crucial services provided to Ohioans. Thank you for your consideration.