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**Testimony of Susan Wallace
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Senate Health Committee**

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Good afternoon, Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Liston and members of the Senate Health Committee. We appreciate the opportunity to share our thoughts on the operating budget for SFY 2026-2027.

LeadingAge Ohio is an association representing nearly 400 members that serve older Ohioans across the buckeye state. In a given year, we employ roughly 35,000 and serve nearly 400,000 older Ohioans. Our members include affordable and market rate senior housing, life plan communities, nursing homes, assisted Living, home health, hospice, and palliative care, as well as adult day services. LeadingAge Ohio also supports the PACE Association of Ohio, that represents the four organizations standing up the Program for All-inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) across the state of Ohio.

What differentiates our members from their counterparts is that they are guided by mission and values. Over 90% are not-for-profits, over 70% are founded by or tethered to faith-based organizations.

Since our membership spans the spectrum of aging services in Ohio, our budget priorities cover a wide range of initiatives as well, including funding for home- and community based services, nursing facility payment reform, hospice payments, increases to the personal needs allowance, ways to improve the caregiving career space, and the Program for All-inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE). Today, we will focus on home- and community-based services, the increase to the personal needs allowance, as well as a workforce proposal.

Home and Community-based Services (HCBS)

In the last biennial budget, the state of Ohio made significant investments to shore up a weakened network of long-term services and supports providers. The increases were dramatic, a

“feast” period to rectify over a decade of flat-funding “famine” in aging services. The recovery is playing out in significantly more providers engaging in PASSPORT and Assisted Living Waiver and more individuals being served by these programs, which had long experienced significantly more services approved than were able to be delivered due to the shortage of workers and organizations willing to participate at payment levels that were well below their costs. Despite this recent growth, we are not yet back to pre-pandemic levels of either providers participating or individuals being served in these programs, despite a growing population of older adults that are eligible and in need of services.

We look forward to working with this body to sustain and grow future investments in these areas, with thoughtful policy recommendations that will rebuild home-based care options for older Ohioans.

Personal Needs Allowance

LeadingAge Ohio supports the increase to the personal needs allowance (PNA) for individuals residing in nursing homes, intermediate care facilities and assisted living. The PNA is essential to preserving dignity and enhancing quality of life for long-term care residents, whether in nursing homes or assisted living, by allowing them to receive services like haircuts and styles, to choose clothing that suits their preferences, and to cover other incidentals like having a cell phone plan or other items to enrich their day-to-day lives. Ohio’s PNA has not been increased in nearly 10 years, and then it was only increased from \$40 to \$50 per month. The House-proposed increase to \$75 per month brings Ohio in-line with other states and is a welcome change that will directly impact residents of senior living communities.

Caregiving Workforce

Ohio is a leader among states in innovative strategies to retain talent and drive workforce development. In particular, programs such as Tech Cred and the Individual Micro-credential Assistance Program (IMAP) are effective tools to support growing our workforce in critical areas of need and upskilling existing workers already attached to an employer.

Home health and personal care aides are Ohio’s #1 top job, with over 15,000 current openings statewide, representing a 13.7 % vacancy rate, with an additional 2,300 jobs annually being added annually. Nurse assistants, which typically work in nursing homes, are also among Ohio’s “top jobs” with just over 7,700 current vacancies, representing a 10.9 % vacancy rate.

LeadingAge Ohio, along with other aging network advocates, believes that a first step towards standardizing and promoting caregiving careers is for the state of Ohio to take an active role in promoting these keystone professions. We support the expansion of the Tech Cred and IMAP programs to include training in these direct care workforce areas, to usher individuals into caregiving careers as well as upskill those that have already committed to the vocation.

We believe these initiatives would ensure that all Ohioans have dignity, choice and access to the supports they need as they age. We appreciate the opportunity to share our thoughts and welcome any questions you may have.