



House Bill 96- State Operating Budget for FY2026-27

Senate Health Committee

Kelly A. Morris, Health Commissioner, Carroll County General Health District

May 14, 2025

Chair Huffman, Vice-Chair Johnson and Ranking Member Liston, and Member of the Health Committee, I am Kelly Morris, I serve as the Health Commissioner for Carroll County. In addition, I currently serve as the President of the Ohio Public Health Association (OPHA). As a health commissioner and public health nurse in a small rural and Appalachian County, I urge you to reinstate the Governor's request for full funding to fully implement the Family Connects program across Ohio. This investment is not only lifesaving, but also fiscally responsible. **For every \$1 invested in a home visit program, there is a return of up to \$5.70.¹**

Public Health Nurses (PHNs) bring a unique skill set to home visiting, especially in the vulnerable postpartum period. Through the evidence-based Family Connects model, RNs conduct home visits for all birth mothers, reducing emergency room visits and improving health outcomes for entire families.

To date, 18 counties have been awarded Family Connects funds, with 11 led by local health departments where PHNs are already delivering results. Our stories reflect not only the compassion of our healthcare workers but also the lived experiences and barriers faced by Ohioans in both urban AND rural counties. I live and work in Carroll County, a very small rural county in Appalachian Ohio, I would like to share a few experiences about my work and how having this program could help your constituents.

In Carroll County, the journey to parenthood is marked by barriers few in our state can imagine. There is no hospital within the county, and no direct access to an interstate. For pregnant women, this means traveling a minimum of 45 minutes in any direction just to reach a delivery room — a delay that can mean life or death in an emergency. But birth is only the beginning.

Our community is experiencing a maternal and child health crisis shaped by poverty, isolation, and a lack of essential services. Prenatal and postpartum care is scarce. There are only four childcare providers serving the entire county — and that number is shrinking. Without safe, reliable childcare, employment becomes nearly impossible, trapping families in cycles of

¹ https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG341.pdf

dependence and poverty. Our moms are strong and devoted, but love alone cannot overcome the layers of social, economic, and generational barriers they face.

Inside Our Homes: The Hidden Risks to Our Children

When we enter the homes of families across Carroll County, we witness heartbreaking realities — not from neglect, but from deep, unmet needs:

- A 3-year-old boy, likely autistic and severely developmentally delayed, is locked in his room and fed through the door. He has never been evaluated or diagnosed.
- A young mother of premature twins — discharged home on oxygen — is trying to care for them in a two-bedroom apartment overcrowded with eight other adults, all of whom smoke. There are no cribs. No safe sleep options. No space to breathe.
- A mother of five children under the age of five lives under the strict control of her husband, who manages their money, food access, and only means of transportation. All signs point to coercive control and possible human trafficking — and yet, she remains invisible to systems that might help.

Our Community Needs More Than Compassion — We Need Action

These are not isolated stories. They are the daily reality for too many families in Carroll County. The conditions into which children are born are not safe. The resources meant to support their parents are virtually nonexistent. If we do not intervene — with education, access, advocacy, and support — the cycle will continue.

We must invest in home visits provided by Registered Nurses and Family Connects Model. Nurses reach these families early—within three weeks of birth—offering medical care, emotional support, and vital connections to services.

PHNs are trained professionals who know how to engage mothers in care. They identify problems early and design responsive care plans, leveraging trusted relationships with hospitals and providers to wrap support around newborns and families. Again, **these services reduce Medicaid costs, lower absenteeism, and improve long-term outcomes. The ROI is clear: for every \$1 invested in home visiting, there is a return of up to \$5.70.**

Our families love their children. What they lack is a system that sees them, serves them, and stands beside them. With the right support, Carroll County can be a place where every baby has a safe start, every mother has a fighting chance, and every family has the opportunity to thrive.

Please restore full funding to the Family Connects program. Your leadership today will shape Ohio's health and prosperity for generations.