

SENATE MEDICAID COMMITTEE TESTIMONY: APRIL 29, 2025

Chairman Romanchuk, Vice Chair Huffman, and Ranking Member Liston:

My name is Tony Thomas, Executive Director of Welcome House, a service and residential provider in the Cleveland and Cuyahoga County area. We serve 210 persons with developmental disabilities and have a staff of over 380. Which, as I will explain in a bit, this staff number was not always available to us.

I am coming to you today to both thank you and request something of you. The thanks come in as a way of expressing my deep gratitude to all of you for the desperately needed increase in funding for services for Ohioans with developmental disabilities. Our system's unique reliance on Medicaid reimbursement means that our ability to address the rising costs of labor can only be achieved with financial support of this body. Our request today is about ensuring stability into the future.

During the height of the pandemic and subsequent workforce disruption, for me, it was like being the captain of the Titanic without Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet. I thought COVID and our staffing crisis would sink our agency. I was concerned about how we would survive and keeping our clients and staff safe from COVID. After significant advocacy from the developmental disabilities system, the 135th General Assembly dispatched a much needed life boat in the form of significant service reimbursement increases.

Prior to the increases, we experienced a decline in staffing like many businesses, but it hit us especially hard. At one point we were down to 287 staff, losing over 90 employees to business competitors like Target, Walmart, and Amazon whose wages and benefits far outpaced what Welcome House could offer. Welcome House had open hours totaling over 3600 per pay period. Now we are only having weekend part time positions open totally under 1,000 (and no full-time openings). Overtime was eating up our budget at over 28% of all hours worked, now overtime is below 8%. That is the lowest it has ever been. Funds provided in the last budget went to staff, and for many, this was life changing for them. Starting rates of pay went from \$12.38 to an average of \$19.00. During the pandemic we were not accepting new clients and shrinking services. We are now accepting new clients and expanding services and supports to families and persons in need. All of this means that your investment worked from the last budget. But going forward, where will we be?

The 135th General Assembly helped us rebuild a solid foundation for services in our field. But we need to be aware that this could slip back into the Atlantic Ocean like the Titanic.

As I mentioned to both the Ohio House and Senate two years ago, no other industry in Ohio shares the same level of reliance on Medicaid funds. Further, our system is designed to meet the full spectrum of needs in the developmental disabilities community, from serving people with developmental disabilities and complex medical needs, behavioral health needs, to mental health needs in people's local communities across the state. We ask that you consider small additional reimbursement rate increases and adopt a reimbursement review process wage structure so that future rate adjustments can be supported by data. I know this is a challenging request given the federal uncertainty around Medicaid and overall economic uncertainty. As I mentioned to both the Ohio House and Senate two years ago, there is no other industry in Ohio like ours. Our system is designed to meet the full spectrum of needs in the developmental disabilities community, serving

people with developmental disabilities and complex medical needs, behavioral health needs, and mental health needs in people's local communities across the state. Thank you and I can take any questions.

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