



**Senate Medicaid Committee
Substitute House Bill 96
Friendship Circle of Cleveland
Eli Shomer, Development Director
Jeremy Ginsberg, Parent
Izabella Bashkin, Student
May 6, 2025**

Chairman Romanchuk, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Senate Medicaid Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Eli Shomer, and I am the Development Director of Friendship Circle of Cleveland. I'm pleased to be here today to share with you the services Friendship Circle provides to children with disabilities and their families.

For 22 years, Friendship Circle has been a lifeline for families raising children with disabilities. What began with a handful of children and dedicated teen volunteers has transformed into a wide-reaching support network. Today, Friendship Circle offers more than 30 programs focused on fostering social enrichment and essential family support. Hundreds of families across Northern Ohio, from Pepper Pike in Cuyahoga County to Mentor in Lake County to Mansfield, rely on Friendship Circle as their village, their community.

The impact of Friendship Circle goes far beyond its programs—it's about creating a true sense of belonging and empowerment. By pairing children with disabilities with teen volunteers, we build real friendships and break down social barriers. Both the teens and the children grow from these experiences. It's hard to say who gains more—the child who feels included and supported, or the teen who learns empathy and understanding, something our world truly needs more of. As these teens grow into adults, they carry with them a deeper awareness of the unseen challenges many families face every day, often carried quietly by parents.

Since Fiscal Year 2024, with \$200,000 in annual funding from the State of Ohio, Friendship Circle has seen remarkable growth. We've launched 12 new programs for children and families with disabilities, added six new team members, and increased the number of participating children and teen volunteers by about one-third.

The demand for our services continues to grow as more families turn to Friendship Circle for support. Our current annual budget of \$2.1 million, which is primarily funded through private donations and foundations, is stretched to its limit. Without an endowment, we must rebuild our funding each year to continue our work. Public funding for services for children with disabilities remains very limited. **This is why I respectfully request your support for an annual appropriation of \$300,000 for Friendship Circle.** This funding will allow us to expand our



programs, reach more families, and offer a broader range of services to meet the diverse needs of our community.

Now, I'd like to introduce Jeremy Ginsberg, a Friendship Circle parent, to share his personal experience and the lasting impact our programs have had on his family.

Chair Romanchuk and members of the committee, my name is Jeremy Ginsberg, thank you for the opportunity to testify. My son Simon was diagnosed with Autism when he was 5. I was still trying to navigate the reality of becoming a single parent to Simon and his sister when my parents "suggested" we go to a barbecue that Friendship Circle was hosting to learn about their programs.

To say that day changed our lives is not hyperbole. For starters, I didn't have any viable options for childcare for Simon for the rest of the summer, and as a single dad it is a challenge to work and keep him occupied. By the time we left Simon was signed up for their End of Summer camp and I had a meeting set up with the family supports coordinator, who helped me to navigate resources through the county.

In May 2024 I received an email from Beachwood Schools with information on Simon's Extended School Year Program. Simon gets amazing services through Beachwood and is thriving. Unfortunately, Beachwood was having trouble finding enough staff to cover all their ESY students so they found a program to partner with. While the program looked great, it would be nearly an hour commute to and from our house. I didn't think that was going to work for Simon and I wasn't sure what to do. On a whim I called Friendship Circle asked, "I know this is a long shot, but is there any chance Simon could do his Extended School program there?" Their answer in a nutshell was, "Don't worry. We got you. This is where he belongs." It was probably the best summer of his life.

Then they hit me with a bombshell of good news- they were planning to start offering ABA therapy and asked if I want to sign Simon up. Since January Simon goes to Friendship Circle four days a week and on Sunday!

Friendship Circle has given Simon and our family and many, many other kids and families so much not just because they believe in and love what they are doing, all the staff and volunteers have such love for each and every participant. Little did I know when Simon and I went to that first BBQ we weren't going to find an organization that has services for him, but a family that loves him and gives him so much support.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. Now I'd like to introduce, Izabella Bashkin, a teen volunteer to share her experience.

Hello everyone, my name is Izabella Bashkin, or Izzy. I'm a junior at Hawken School in Cleveland, and I want to begin by saying thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here and talk about this incredible organization I'm a part of. It's truly an honor to be here today, and I'm excited to share what we do and how we make a difference in our community.



I've been a part of Friendship Circle for several years now, and it has truly become like a second home to me. Over time, I've been involved in nearly every program we offer and have hung out with almost every kid.

Some of my best friends I've met through Friendship Circle, and I'm lucky enough to hang out with them every week and throughout the summer. Whether it's at day camp, a playdate at home, or on field trips, I've never shared more laughs and smiles than I have at Friendship Circle.

Friendship isn't just important for social and cognitive growth, but it's also about feeling accepted, valued, supported, and building relationships that last a lifetime.

Now, I can't speak for the kids, but on behalf of the volunteers, Friendship Circle is by far the most fun and fulfilling experience I've ever had. Not only have I met so many wonderful and kind people, but I've grown as a person as well.

One of my favorite things about spending time with kids, whether it's at Friendship Circle or babysitting, is their honesty. They say exactly what's on their mind and are always true to themselves. I'll admit, some comments have caught me off guard, but I have so much admiration for them because of that.

Personally, I tend to be a bit of a people-pleaser and stay quiet and mold myself to the people I'm with. But it was my third day at Friendship Circle, and I started saying something but then I got self-conscious, and cut myself off. And my buddy noticed and tapped me on the shoulder, smiled, and told me to finish what I was saying. From then on, I've never felt more comfortable or welcome anywhere else.

Overall, Friendship Circle is single handedly responsible for creating an environment where strong, raw, and amazing friendships thrive, and I'm so thankful for the opportunity to be a part of it.

Thank you for considering this request. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.