Senate Medicaid Committee
Substitute House Bill 96
Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center
Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Amber Holcomb, Client Mother
May 6, 2025

Good morning, Chairperson Romanchuk, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Medicaid Committee.

My name is Amber Holcomb and I am the mother of a wonderful 3 year old named Theo, who was born profoundly deaf. I am here today as a concerned parent to speak in support of the budget amendment to increase funding for Ohio's Community Centers for the Deaf under the Department of Developmental Disabilities.

When our son Theo was born, he was perfect. I didn't think twice when they came into the room for the newborn hearing screen. The setting was normal, just like when my daughter had it done 3 years prior: in the hospital room bassinet next to my bed. He was hooked up to the machine, the nurse was making idle small talk with me, then came the first time we heard "he failed". I would love to say I didn't panic, but I did. "It's probably just fluid in the ears from the C-section" is what they told me, "We will reassess it later".

A few weeks after discharge from the hospital I took my newborn, alone because I didn't think much of it, to his first audiology appointment. They hooked his head up to wires and shoved things in his ears, I sat there with him in my arms and stared at him while he slept through all of the beeps that I could clearly hear without assistance. I stared at the unmoving face of his Audiologist, trying to get a read on what she was seeing/thinking. When it was finished, she said, "We are going to be such good friends" and told me he was severe to profoundly deaf in both ears. My first thought was "I don't want to be friends; I just want my son to be OK". And we would be, but I didn't know that yet.

Deafness wasn't something that had ever crossed our minds during pregnancy. Especially not in a family like ours, with no history of hearing loss. We were blindsided. There was grief, confusion, fear—questions we didn't know how to ask, let alone answer. At some point I told his Dad that he could leave if he didn't want this life, I was emotional (obviously). What would communication look like? Would he feel alone? How would we help him thrive in a world that often doesn't see or understand deafness? Would our family learn how to communicate with him? What about school? Friends?

Theo was just 3 to 4 months old when we entered an early intervention program through the state. It was the beginning of everything; I couldn't even imagine at the time how important this would be for our journey. Our audiologist and speech therapist came into our home, not only to support Theo's development, but to walk with us through an entirely new world. They were our bridge—teaching us, encouraging us, and introducing us to something we didn't know we needed: the Deaf community.

Theo has cochlear implants and uses both spoken English and American Sign Language (ASL). This bilingual approach isn't just a method of communication—it's a way for him to connect with both worlds, to have choices, to be fully himself. Deafness is not something to be "fixed." It's part of who Theo is, and embracing that has been the most important shift in our journey. Most importantly, giving Theo cochlear implants at 9 months old was not to make him "hearing" or "normal". He will never be hearing, but he will always be Deaf. His experience is unique. His needs are unique.

Cleveland doesn't have a Deaf school, and the Deaf community here is small. We need these community centers to bring people together, to provide inclusion for all age groups. How important is it to see and interact with people just like you? Going through the same things as you? Experiencing the same highs and lows? I think that's one of the biggest lifelines for everyone. I know it is for me.

Without early intervention, we would have felt completely alone. Through the Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center, we began attending community events when we were able. There, we met other parents and children like Theo. Watching him play with other deaf kids, seeing him light up when someone signed to him—that's when it clicked. This is where he belongs. This is his community. This is what he is a part of, even though we are not. We've been to zoo events, ice cream socials, and any other child friendly gathering we are able to attend. We've met kids just like him and adults just like us who are also new to navigating this world. I've made friends that I would have never met without the Cleveland Hearing and Speech center or without the help of Early Intervention.

Most people don't give the Deaf community a second thought. It's an invisible disability. You can't see the extra effort it takes to stay in a conversation, or the isolation that can creep in when others forget to include you. Theo will face challenges that we won't fully understand, but we can do everything possible to make sure he never faces them alone.

The Deaf community offers something we can't give on our own: connection, culture, identity, pride. It's not just important—it's essential. Through early intervention and the people who guided us, we've found a community that lifts Theo up and shows him that his deafness is not a limitation—it's a part of who he is, and it's something to be proud of.

As the parent of a child who is deaf, I've seen how crucial it is for every young person to have a place where they feel accepted, supported, and truly understood. Community Centers for the Deaf are not just programs—they are anchors for families like mine. These centers provide vital access to language, foster cultural identity, and create a sense of belonging that every child deserves, regardless of how they hear or communicate. In Ohio, these centers help families navigate complex systems—education, healthcare, and daily life—while giving our children a space where they are not isolated, but connected and celebrated.

At the heart of it, all parents want the same things: for our children to be recognized, to be included, and to have every chance to grow with confidence and pride in who they are. That's what these centers make possible. And that's why we must ensure they remain strong.

I recognize that budget decisions are never simple, and that allocating more funding often means difficult choices. But some priorities reflect the values we hold as a community. As a mother to a child with hearing loss, I urge you to consider what continued access means—not just for his early years, but for his entire future. When families lose access to these supports, they lose more than services—they lose connection, clarity, and stability. Children lose opportunities to reach their potential.

This amendment is about more than funding—it's about fairness, inclusion, and investing in people who deserve the tools to succeed. I ask you to support this amendment—not just for my child, but for every family relying on our leadership to create a more equitable and compassionate Ohio.

Thank you for your service and for listening to my perspective today.

Sincerely,

Amber Holcomb