

**Senate Medicaid Committee
Substitute House Bill 96
Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center
Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Jennell Vick, President & CEO
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 Dr. Jennell Vick, and I am the President & CEO of Cleveland Hearing and Speech Center, home of Cleveland's Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. I write on behalf of all of Ohio's seven Community Centers for the Deaf and Hard of hearing and the thousands of deaf individuals we serve every year. Other Community Centers for the Deaf are in Dayton, Columbus, Cincinnati, Youngstown, Canton, and Akron.

Together, we serve individuals and families who know, first hand, the challenges of achieving your potential in this state if you are deaf or hard of hearing. It seems challenges are around every corner for these children and adults—from developing language skills in infancy and toddler years, through the years of primary and secondary education, all the way to living independently and joining the workforce. Our Community Centers for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing are funded by the state, although the level of funding has, historically, been insufficient to even begin to meet the needs of the communities we serve. **Your support of an \$800,000 appropriation each fiscal year for Community Centers for the Deaf will make a transformative investment in the many ways these individuals stand to contribute to our communities, our economy, and, most importantly, to their families and other loved ones.**

Over 90 percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents. Many families never learn American Sign Language (ASL). This means that the deaf child never learns any language and we refer to them as having language deprivation. This is very common in deaf individuals in Ohio. It means that these individuals cannot access basic services in everyday life, which can lead to a feeling of isolation, identity loss, exclusion, and a lack of cultural identity. The deaf community has been greatly impacted by this and many of our deaf adult clients have the reading ability of 2-3 grade.

Navigating the world with a second grade reading level is extremely difficult, and on top of that, most community resources do not have ASL access. Consider how difficult it was for my colleague, Elizabeth Whelpdale, who will testify in person, to arrange an interpreter to join her today to share her perspective on the state budget. None was provided and so my agency sent our best from Cleveland to support her. This is why our community centers are so important to the deaf community. We help them to access and navigate information they need to thrive and gain independence.

At the hearing, you will hear from families who have been connected and served by Community Centers for the Deaf. Their experiences parenting children with hearing loss will help you understand

Affiliations:Case Western Reserve University
United Way of Greater Cleveland**Accreditations:**CARF
Certified Medicare & Medicaid Provider
National Association of Speech and Hearing Centers
Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf

how important it is for these families, who live in districts across the state, to have access to the resources that CCDs provide. From getting access to quality preschool education to getting access to opportunities as a professional with hearing loss, the challenges are real. Our Community Centers ease and work toward reducing these challenges. Without them, Ohio families will struggle.

Ohio's seven Community Centers for the Deaf serve all 88 counties with very meager resources. Limited state funding is available for this work through Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD), which administers \$527,000 in GRF each fiscal year through the "Services for the Deaf" line item. These funds are disbursed between the Community Centers for the Deaf to fund one full time equivalent employee at each site.

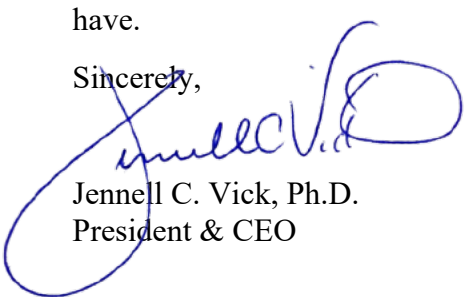
An additional \$772,420 in funding has been provided to Ohio's Community Centers for the Deaf because of OOD's participation in the Social Security Vocational Rehabilitation Cost Reimbursement program. Leadership from Ohio's Community Centers for the Deaf learned, on March 5, that OOD has had a devastating reduction in Social Security Cost Reimbursements in Fiscal Year 2025. This reduction has created a negative impact on OOD cash balances, and we were notified that our funding would, therefore, be unavailable over the biennium.

The impact of any cut to the small allocation that each Community Center for the Deaf receives will be devastating. We will be unable to retain our staff members, who are specially trained to provide services for those who are deaf using ASL as the primary communication method. Our deaf and hard of hearing support staff, who are charged with traveling to the remote counties of our state to provide services, will likely be unable to continue these services. Deaf residents of rural counties will lose access to these life-sustaining services. These residents of your districts who are working, today, on the skills necessary to enter the workforce, will no longer have hope of fulfilling their potential and supporting their communities. This impact will be felt immediately.

I respectfully request your support for an \$800,000 appropriation each fiscal year for Community Centers for the Deaf so that we can continue our work with deaf individuals and their families across the State of Ohio.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,



Jennell C. Vick, Ph.D.
President & CEO