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

My name is Bridget Skuggen and I am Molly's mom. Molly is 1 and a half and was born with a rare condition called microtia and atresia. She has severe hearing loss in her right ear. I am here today as a concerned parent to speak in support of budget amendment XXX that would increase funding for Ohio's Community Centers for the Deaf under the Department of Developmental Disabilities.

I'm not sure if you are parents, but if you are, you may remember that first day in the hospital after your babies were born pretty clearly. When Molly was born, we were very surprised by her little ear, but that parental bliss and adrenaline rush after giving birth completely took over–plus we had no idea anything was truly wrong. The next day, when Molly was barely 24 hours old, we had her newborn hearing screen. Assuming your children are hearing, this probably wasn't a very memorable test for you. But for us, our world changed significantly. The audiologist kept making "tsk tsk" and "hmmm" noises, and when I asked what was wrong, she said, "She's not passing". I asked, "So she's failing the test?" and she responded, "We're not allowed to say fail. She's not passing." I laughed to myself and thought, *wow my daughter is getting her first participation trophy at less than 24 hours old by not failing this test.* After the hearing screen, I took a really close look at her ear and noticed she had no ear canal. The pediatrician came in before we were discharged and told us she has not seen this before, set up appointments with ENT and audiology, and sent us on our way. The reality sunk in over the next few days. Molly is deaf on her right side. What does that look like for her future? How will this really impact her? How will we navigate this as a family?

It wasn't until her first audiology appointment that fear of the unknown was replaced with hope and relief. Molly's audiologist taught us about microtia and atresia, told us it is the most straight-forward type of hearing loss to treat, and encouraged us that the hurdles Molly will face are not the mountains we were imagining. Molly's hearing loss is conductive, not sensorineural, which means it's an anatomy problem, not a nerve problem. Her hearing nerve is perfectly intact, while her outer and middle ear are missing or malformed. She wears a bone anchored hearing aid on a headband which transmits sound from her skull bone directly to her hearing nerve, so when she's wearing it, she has full access to sound. She is a typical 1 and a half year old, so keeping the headband on can be a battle, but as she gets older, her hearing aid will be extremely beneficial in school and other noisy environments. With unilateral hearing loss, Molly struggles with localization of sound, hearing in a crowded space, and hearing when multiple people are talking at once. Sorry, about your luck, Molly, you were born into a very big and loud family! Her hearing aid bridges the gap to make it easier for her to hear in those situations.

While I was processing all of this over Molly's first few weeks of life, I was pleasantly surprised to receive phone calls from various organizations affiliated with the state of Ohio that were alerted to Molly's hearing loss since she did not pass the newborn hearing screen in the hospital. As a new mom in the trenches of newborn life, not having to seek out the support myself and having it come to me did wonders for my mental health and my ability to navigate this new world of hearing loss with Molly. We were connected with Help Me Grow, Snapshots– a program to learn about the Deaf community and what raising a child with hearing loss looks like, given zoom sessions with a Deaf mentor who taught me sign language, and the reason I am here today, Cleveland Hearing & Speech– which provides us with a connection to the Deaf community.

As Molly's mom, I can't overstate how essential our local Community Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing has been for our family. It's more than a building—it's a place where my child feels accepted, where she sees others who communicate with ASL, and where our family has found guidance and connection. We even met another little girl with microtia who wears a BAHA like Molly! To meet someone else who not only wears the same type of hearing aid, but also looks like her was amazing since her condition is so rare and the facial difference part of microtia can sometimes feel as daunting as the hearing loss. Because of Cleveland Hearing & Speech, I feel less alone on this journey that no one else I knew was experiencing before having the chance to interact with other moms attending Learn, Laugh, Grow events, a hearing loss playgroup put on by the Center. Every parent wants their child to feel like they belong and have the tools to thrive, and these centers provide just that. They offer critical support—from early intervention to educational resources to community events—that help our children grow up confident and connected. Families like mine depend on these centers to help bridge the gap between the hearing world and our children's unique needs. We all want the best for our kids, and that includes having places where they are not only included, but celebrated.

I know that increasing the budget is a difficult decision, and that there are many competing needs—but some choices reflect our deepest values. As a mom of a child born with hearing loss, I'm asking you to support an amendment that would ensure she has access to the care, services, and community that will support her for a lifetime. These resources aren't just helpful—they're essential to her ability to communicate, learn, work, and feel connected to the world around her. Without this funding, too many families will be left to navigate overwhelming challenges alone. This amendment is about more than money—it's about fairness, inclusion, and standing by the belief that every child, no matter their ability, deserves the chance to belong and thrive.

As a parent, I'm asking you to support this amendment—not just for Molly, but for every family who deserves a community where their child can thrive.

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

Sincerely,

Bridget Skuggen