

February 23, 2021

Honorable Bill Roemer
Ohio House of Representatives
Chairman, HHS Subcommittee of the Ohio House Finance Committee
77 S. High Street
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Chairman Roemer,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony to the Health & Human Services Subcommittee of the Ohio House Finance Committee, on HB 110, the biennial budget bill. My name is Critty Buenconsejo, and I am the President & CEO of Creative Housing Inc. Creative Housing is a non-profit entity in Columbus, Ohio that has been providing safe and affordable community-based homes to people with disabilities throughout Franklin County since 1991. In contrast to institutional settings, these neighborhood homes support independent living closer to families, jobs and networks of acquaintances. Creative Housing homes are renovated for the accessibility needs of residents, ensuring their home environment is safe and best suits their individual needs. In addition to owning homes dedicated to providing community settings for people with disabilities, Creative Housing provides subsidies to qualified persons with disabilities to live affordably in the private rental market. Creative Housing has supported affordable housing needs for over 2,500 persons with disabilities.

People with disabilities can often feel isolated, and especially so during a pandemic. Creative Housing is supported with federal, state and local funding and is seeking additional state funding specific to the purpose of providing for a more integrated community living experience for persons with disabilities through connectivity by technology. Funding will bring WiFi service, devices and life safety enhancements to every resident living in community homes owned and maintained by Creative Housing. This access to technology will enhance the lives of individuals in the home as follows:

Isolation Curtailment: Even prior to the pandemic, it has been becoming more and more commonplace to communicate and remain connected through technology. Access to WiFi connected devices will provide a means for residents to be less isolated from family, friends, caregivers, and the community at large. This is particularly essential as our society continues to live in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Healthcare & Well-Being: WiFi connected devices will provide a means for residents to access necessary healthcare services through telehealth, including access to primary care, mental healthcare, occupational therapy, physical therapy, prescription adherence reminders, and better care coordination with direct care providers. Additionally, residents will be ensured of having access to the online resources that drive information about the pandemic and access to the COVID-19 vaccine and other pandemic-related guidance. In other words, enhanced technology will help drive better health outcomes for residents, and better health outcomes help drive cost savings to the DD system in Ohio.

Safety: Included fire safety technology will provide Creative Housing residents with improved services. And as both fire departments and law enforcement entities continue to incorporate technology in the services they provide to keep communities safe, residents will be able to leverage those technologies.

Increased Independence: With the foundation of WiFi services in place, all Creative Housing residents will be able to incorporate smart home functions. Smart home devices allow people with disabilities to interact with caregivers virtually and efficiently, increasing independence and self-esteem.

Improved Support Services: Federal guidelines place electronic records keeping requirements, including proof of geolocation, on direct care support staff. This creates an additional layer of cost burden on both the care organization and individual staff, which is unfunded by the programs putting such guidelines in place. Some provisions are in place making older cell phone technology available to direct care staff, but organizations are finding the older technology unreliable. Having WiFi available to both residents and caregivers will allow care organizations to redirect monies to increasing pay and training for direct care staff, promoting a higher quality of care.

Education & Continued Learning: Creative Housing residents will gain access to online and virtual learning opportunities, especially now that those opportunities have been enhanced due to the pandemic. This would also include access to online services provided by the library system.

Jobs: Creative Housing residents will be able to access a large scope of job opportunities, particularly given the growth of “work from home” and remote/virtual performance in our job market resulting from the pandemic, which many predict will continue beyond the pandemic.

Based on our review of the as introduced version of HB 110 thus far, we are pleased to see provisions that speak to and are supportive of people with disabilities having access to technology to help them thrive and overcome whatever challenges exist through their disabilities. Specifically, we would like to reference Ohio Revised Code Sections 5123.025 and 5123.026 at lines 39743-39773 of the bill in this regard, which outlines the Technology First Initiative through the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities. We encourage the subcommittee to support this language, as well as the connected appropriation in Section 261.160 of the bill (lines 53128-53139).

Additionally, Creative Housing has great interest in the current focus being given to the issue of broadband expansion, and ensuring all Ohioans have access to technology as a result. We are reviewing the portions of HB 110 that are related to this issue, in order to identify any opportunities that may exist within that context to support access to technology for people with disabilities. We look forward to future communications with you in regards to this, as well as any other provisions of HB 110 that we identify as being of interest based on our ongoing review.

In summary, Creative Housing supports funding initiatives in HB 110 that will provide access to technology for people with disabilities. Such funding will have meaningful, positive impact on the lives of the disabled population that it serves. The need for connectivity is particularly acute in these challenging times when the general population itself is more isolated in efforts to protect the overall health of Ohioans. The pandemic isolation layered onto disabilities results in persons with disabilities becoming even more isolated and dependent. Providing stable technology to these disabled residents will serve to ensure they are not left behind given the current environment in which we are all living and ensure they have a foundation on which continued connectivity benefits can be built. Additionally, enhancing technology services as outlined above will drive cost savings by leveraging better physical and mental health outcomes, and is aligned with the state’s goal of encouraging the use of technology to support people with disabilities by providing better access to opportunities in our society, such as educational and employment opportunities.

Mr. Chairman, again I appreciate the opportunity to provide these written comments, and I would be happy to respond to any questions that you or other members of the subcommittee have with respect to this testimony. Also, please feel free to reach out to our government affairs counsel, Joe Stevens, at joe.stevens@steptoe-johnson.com, or at 614-203-8342.

Sincerely,

Crittty Buenconsejo
President|CEO, Creative Housing Inc.

cc: Honorable Scott Lipps
Honorable Jay Edwards
Honorable Thomas West
Honorable Allison Russo