

House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
House Bill 110 (Oelslager)
Written Testimony of Steve Province, FACHE
President & CEO, Buckeye Health Plan
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Chairman Roemer, Ranking Member West and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to share with you today how Buckeye Health Plan, along with Ohio's other Medicaid managed care plans, quickly mobilized to help our members, providers and communities combat COVID-19.

Buckeye is proud to be your partner in improving quality, promoting innovation and reducing costs for nearly 500,000 Ohioans enrolled in Medicaid, Ohio's MyCare program, Medicare and the Health Insurance Exchange. Our continuum of products allows our members to maintain coverage with our company as they earn out of Medicaid and throughout their lives. We are making a positive difference in the lives of our members, many of whom rely on the services we provide to keep or find a job, live comfortably in their homes rather than in an institution and provide a better life for their family. Many of our members have complex needs that require a comprehensive and collaborative array of services to meet those needs. Buckeye Health Plan, in partnership with our parent company, Centene, has been aggressive in supporting those we are honored to serve.

Supporting our members

Buckeye is covering the cost of our members' coronavirus testing, screening and treatment. We have waived prior authorizations, certifications, notifications and step therapy for testing, screening services and supplies. We relaxed co-pay and authorization requirements for coronavirus treatment for our members. For medications, we are waiving "refill-too-soon" limits that required members to wait until prescriptions were close to exhausted before renewing them, and we have continued to provide 90-day supplies at retail and mail order locations.

We know COVID-19 has disrupted regularly scheduled healthcare services. To better ensure the continued health and wellness of all our members, we instituted an influenza vaccine campaign to encourage our members to receive their normal flu shots. We also instituted mammography and cervical cancer screening campaigns for our members to ensure regular cancer screenings are not forgotten.

Recognizing the importance of limiting gatherings, we shifted certain programs to a more virtual environment. For instance, expectant mothers in need of support can get diapers and other supplies through our "drive-thru" baby showers and enroll in virtual programming to get answer to questions about what to expect for their pregnancy and their new baby's health and wellness.

Our recent focus has shifted to supporting vaccination efforts in collaboration with the Ohio Department of Medicaid and other partners. Buckeye's COVID vaccine distribution response began with the initiation of our own Buckeye Vaccine Task Force in December, which quickly merged with similar efforts led by the Ohio Association of Health Plans and the State of Ohio. We are working hard to encourage our members to get vaccinated and we are supporting members who need help accessing the vaccine.

First, we developed standard COVID vaccine communication materials, including call center talking points, member communications, member COVID Vaccine FAQ documents and an "ODH Vaccine Search" walk-through tool. We are pushing out this information to members to provide information about the vaccine and to answer questions that members might have. Next, we have developed a report that stratifies our members based on risk factors, potential barriers to care and vaccination status. This system provides the information we need to identify and reach out directly to members who are at the highest risk of serious adverse outcomes should they contract COVID-19. It also provides additional information about potential barriers—such as transportation—that we can then help address. We are also prioritizing minority populations in order to promote health equity. Buckeye care managers are reaching out to these members to assist them with education, matching with a provider with available vaccine, arranging for any transportation needs and addressing other barriers the member may have. To date, our team has made more than 12,000 direct contacts to members deemed "at-risk."

Our Chief Medical Officer and his colleagues at the other managed care plans are working with our community partners to bring information back to the plans and our state partners regarding community needs and best practices. After speaking with leadership of Ohio's Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), we are working with our medical equipment supplier to purchase and distribute specific medical supplies—like syringes needed for vaccinations—that FQHCs need.

Supporting our providers

We are working with our providers, such as community mental health centers and Centers for Independent Living, to engage in additional member outreach projects for high-risk members. Buckeye has already donated more than \$130,000 worth of PPE and cash to Ohio providers to meet member needs during the pandemic. Buckeye contributed \$65,000 to the YWCA of Columbus' childcare program to help provide childcare for frontline healthcare and other workers. Additionally, we partnered with The Kroger Company to provide food boxes for caregivers of our members with COVID in nursing facilities.

Many of our provider partners reported huge declines in patient volumes, imperiling their ability to maintain operations. In response, Buckeye launched a provider support program to assist providers seeking benefits from the Small Business Administration (SBA) through the CARES Act. Our parent company created a Medicaid Telehealth Partnership with the National Association of Community Health Centers to help FQHCs provide telehealth solutions. We also dedicated \$5 million to purchase equipment and provide related training and technical assistance. We have worked to eliminate red tape for our providers and enhance access to care

for our members. We extended the time to accept claims from all providers to 365 days, and expanded options to bill for telehealth.

Director Corcoran called the enhanced use of telehealth the “silver lining” in this terrible pandemic. We agree. We have seen the shift to a telehealth experience vastly increase member compliance with appointments and ease providers’ ability to serve our members. Telehealth has been particularly beneficial for members needing behavioral health services and in rural areas. We have processed more than 26,000 telehealth claims to date. We are excited that the advancements in this area will continue well beyond the end of this pandemic, providing another option for our members to receive services and care coordination from our network of 40,000+ providers.

We believe that Ohio’s community health workers are a critical component in Ohio’s healthcare system. We are providing them jargon-free materials and informing them about the COVID virus, the vaccine and Ohio’s rollout plan. We have also scheduled webinars for community health workers to give them the most up-to-date information. This will provide our community health workers with the tools and confidence to reach out to Ohioans who have the most difficulty in advocating for themselves and navigating their way to a successful vaccination.

Supporting our communities

Recognizing that minority and rural communities have been especially hard hit by the novel coronavirus, Buckeye partnered with PrimaryOne Health, a central Ohio FQHC, to join a national testing and research partnership; the "Minority and Rural Health Coronavirus Study (MRCS)". This research assesses the impact of COVID-19 on racial minorities and underserved communities. Buckeye and PrimaryOne set up no-cost testing sites in Columbus in late June and continue to enroll people as part of a 5,000-person study. Partnering with the National Minority Quality Foundation, we will continue working with these study enrollees over five years to better understand long-term health effects of this pandemic on underserved communities.

Buckeye remains committed to working with our local partners on healthcare solutions, especially in underserved areas. We have invested \$1.5M and entered into a partnership with Ohio University to create Project ECHO, expanding the University’s regional community health programming and giving southeast Ohio residents greater access to healthcare, and to expand patient navigators to three additional counties. We are working to improve internet access at the consumer level. Through our parent company, Buckeye has committed to purchasing cell phones and equipment for thousands of community members and providers who lack access to the internet, and tablets for students who need devices to complete distance learning.

Realizing that food insecurity is a major barrier to health, Buckeye donated \$45,000 to local food banks to meet the needs of hungry Ohioans. Buckeye also provided \$10,000 to various food distribution centers to assist with increased need for food, funding more than 18,000 meals in total. When the Ohio National Guard was called in to support the COVID relief efforts,

we stepped up to support them with sizeable cash donations to three community organizations that support Guard members and others in the military.

We are proud to employ approximately 1,300 Ohioans in our four office locations throughout the Buckeye state. And it is not lost on us that we are members of the communities we serve. Our company provided new benefits for our employees during the pandemic including offering up to three months paid leave for clinical staff who choose to join a medical reserve force. We are also providing a one-time bonus payment to a small number of employees needed to perform critical functions in our offices. At the beginning of the pandemic when PPE supplies were short, our employees made almost 1,000 masks to donate and distribute to FQHCs in Ohio. Now, we have more than 40 staff volunteers who have been trained and are available to support community and congregate setting testing and vaccination efforts.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to provide this written testimony for the subcommittee. We are proud to partner with you and our other state partners to better serve our members and all Ohioans. Should you or any member want to discuss any of these items, please contact Buckeye's Lead External Relations Specialist Mike Carroll or Buckeye's VP for Government Affairs Eric Poklar. Mike can be reached at dennis.m.carroll@centene.com or 614-942-3336. Eric can be reached at epoklar@centene.com or 614-674-0438.