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House Bill 110
Dawn Blalock
Little Miracles Early Development Center

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the committee, my name is Dawn Blalock and I am the Program Manager at Little Miracles Early Development Center. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony expressing my support for amendment SC2363, which would expand initial child care eligibility from 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to 150% of the FPL in House Bill 110.

Little Miracles EDC is an Ohio licensed 4 star Step Up to Quality child care program that prepares future generations for life long success through quality early learning experiences and family partnerships. We are open non-traditional hours. Our pre-pandemic hours were 5am-12am midnight but due to low enrollment and parents not yet returning to the workforce; we have reduced our hours to close at 8pm.

Little Miracles EDC is testifying today as an interested party to House Bill 110 to urge you to expand initial eligibility for publicly funded child care which would support a family of three making \$32,580 annually which is \$15.66 per hour or less. The percentage increase will keep Ohio working by helping parents afford child care and ensuring more children in low-income families have access to high-quality care.

In 1965 President Lyndon Johnson wrote, “Poverty perpetuates itself. ... children are inheritors of poverty’s curse and not its creators. Unless we act, these children will pass it on to the next generation, like a family birthmark.” A great early childhood experience makes their lives better and they pass a heritage of opportunity to their own children thus breaking generational barriers and the poverty cycle for their family.

Families are being denied the chance to succeed at work and become self-sufficient because they can’t afford quality child care. Achievement gaps widen year after year due to little to low quality early foundation. 80% of brain growth happens in the first three years of a child’s life. Investing in early childhood education is a great way to stop gaps where they begin, long before a child enters kindergarten. But we have to do it in a way that is smart, strategic, and that is equitable. Increasing the federal poverty level for income eligibility standards is a great way to start.

The Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development found that women and communities of color experienced the biggest challenges in the loss of childcare option. These types of barriers have been in place for years and make it hard for women and people of color to successfully climb the social-class ladder. Studies have shown that children that attend a high quality preschool program were more likely to graduate high school and attend college. Fewer smoke, drink, use drugs, receive welfare or have gone to prison.

Having worked in a childcare program for over 15 years, I have seen many families denied childcare benefits because of eligibility. We know that 38% of Ohio's children are living in a single-parent household. The income eligibility standards take gross salary into consideration not net income. With almost 1/3 of Ohio's family income going to rent, mortgage, insurance, taxes, and other related expenses. We are not setting our families up for financial success. Today I would like to tell you about a family that was recently affected by the income eligibility standards. Then I will discuss how these all too familiar circumstances directly effect child care programs across the state of Ohio.

We have served the Argus family since her daughter was an infant. Ms. Argus works at Amazon and her daughter is in our pre-kindergarten program. Our teachers have only a couple of months to continue to prepare her for Kindergarten this fall. During redetermination in December 2020, because she had been promoted to a supervisor position, she was denied childcare benefits. The result was that she had to dis-enroll her daughter from our program. Three months later, Ms. Argus made the tough decision to reduce her hours to part time in order to be eligible for childcare benefits. Can you imagine the pride it took from this young mother to have to cut her hour and pay because she was moving up in her company? Is this not what these programs are meant to do. Help and encourage families to be financially independent. If the eligibility standard were increased to 150% then she would be able to work full time and provide for her families basic care needs.

Programs across the state are constantly experiencing these types of problems and we are seeing a decrease in enrollment because parents are losing childcare benefits. Now, as private pay parents, they have to make the tough decision to either stay home, reduce their income to meet the eligibility standards, or send their children to unlicensed providers. Star rated programs are losing private pay families to family members, baby sitters, or unlicensed providers due to our required higher customary rates. These type of unmonitored and unregulated environment are not developmental appropriate and often time lead to neglect or abuse of our young children. Additionally, they are not trained to provide assessment for developmental delays, able to recognize early intervention, and refer the family to services. They are not required to make developmental appropriate lesson plans or provide activities that foster learning and development. All of these services are required by ODJFS through the Step Up to Quality guidelines. With this type of care, how will Ohio's children be academically and socially-emotionally prepared for school?

As you are already aware, expanding child care eligibility to 150% benefits all Ohioans by preparing more children for success, allowing families like these to return to work full time, increasing enrollment for child care providers, supporting the business workforce, and increasing state and local economies. There is a negative correlation which simultaneously place individuals at high risk of crime due to low educational outcomes. We should use education as one way for crime prevention by closing the achievement gap and equipping Ohio's children to be set up to successfully graduate high school, then college, and become skillfully employed. Thus allowing them to break generational barriers and become financially secure and able to continue to stimulate Ohio's economy.

Childcare is the backbone of our society and we are considered the workforce behind the workforce. The sustainability of our child care system is critical. In its current state, childcare desperately needs this increase to see enrollment retention in child care programs and allow highly rated center to expand because the need would grow.