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Written Testimony in Opposition to SB17
Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee
February 24, 2020

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Chair Roegner, Vice Chair McColley, Ranking Member Craig and members of the Ohio Senate Government Oversight and Reform Committee,

Our names are Patrina Queen and Mary Ellen Nose, we are Paralegals for Southeastern Ohio Legal Services (SEOLS). The following written testimony in opposition to SB 17 is based on our collective 60+ years of experience helping low-income Ohioans access public benefits, Medicaid and unemployment compensation benefits. SEOLS provides civil legal aid and advocacy services to low-income Ohioans in thirty Ohio counties; twenty-seven of which are located in Appalachia.

We oppose this bill because of the unique harm it will cause to our region of the state.

I. Appalachian Ohio suffers from historic poverty and lack of opportunities.

Appalachian Ohio historically has higher collective poverty and unemployment rates than the rest of the state. The economic challenges Appalachian Ohio communities face are detailed in the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies of the region's local development districts.¹ Looming large over these economic challenges are the combined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the opioid epidemic, and unmet infrastructure needs. Recent commitments to expand broadband to some of our southernmost counties is a beginning, but these unmet needs leave Appalachian Ohio uncompetitive for selection or investment by larger employers.

¹ See *Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy 2020*, Buckeye Hills Regional Council, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bcf4ef5b2cf79f60ff09deb/t/5efb947ed305a44006d3a9e7/1593545872013/CEDS_Combined_2020.pdf see also, *Ohio Valley Regional Development Commission 2017 Full Approved Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Summary Background, Economic Development Conditions of the Region*, <https://www.ovrdc.org/media/2017-Full-Approved-CEDS.pdf>; *Ohio Mid-Eastern Governments Association 2020 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy Annual Report*, <http://omegadistrict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020-CEDS-Annual-Report-Update.pdf>

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With its high poverty and unemployment, access to public assistance and unemployment compensation are critical to the region's stability as well as its residents. For example, food assistance programs, such as SNAP, not only help families afford a basic diet, but sustain local grocery stores whose customers primarily rely on SNAP. Similarly, Medicaid not only helps individuals access needed medical care, but impacts the regional economy by supporting medical providers/employers such as local hospitals, nursing facilities, group homes, and community health centers.

To the extent SB 17 will reduce public assistance, Medicaid and unemployment compensation program participation and hurt Ohioans struggling to meet their basic needs, the bill will result in reduced business activity within local and regional economies already struggling prior to the pandemic.

I. Change reporting will be difficult for hourly wage workers to comply with and impossible for under resourced Job and Family Services offices to implement.

The proposed change to remove simplified reporting requirements in the SNAP program would be harmful to many SNAP participants who work hourly wage jobs. Their hours may change each week and can vary substantially without ever rising to a living wage level. Removing the simplified reporting requirements would require the SNAP participant to constantly report and verify very small income changes that are meaningless in the long run. These reporting requirements are not easy for busy SNAP participants to comply with and can become barriers to participation for eligible individuals, especially hourly wage workers and caretakers who cannot easily make constant trips to their county JFS office.

It is hard to overstate the impact these increased reporting requirements would have on county JFS agencies charged with administering these benefits. County JFS agencies in Appalachian Ohio do not have unlimited resources and personnel that they can dedicate to processing large amounts of paperwork. This policy change alone would seriously jeopardize their ability to perform their duties and impair the function of multiple services for which they are responsible.

Client story:

A mother with two small children lost her SNAP benefits because she was unable to complete her telephone interview due to her remote telework job duties. After two attempts to complete the telephone interview, both being interrupted by her work obligations, she gave up pursuing the badly needed SNAP benefits. She struggled for months without benefits when she would likely have qualified for \$300 to \$400 in SNAP benefits. After calling legal aid, she now knows that she can ask for an interview outside her work hours, so she doesn't lose pay in order to complete her interview for SNAP. If change reporting requirements were implemented as proposed under SB 17, many more Ohioans like this mother would struggle to maintain eligibility and be faced with the decision to forgo work or forgo food.

II. Asset limits in SNAP harm senior citizens.

The proposed changes to asset limits and categorical eligibility would cause loss of food security for many Ohioans, including many of our senior citizens. The changes create barriers by forcing people to use minimal resources before qualifying for benefits. It takes away a recipient's ability

to address their food needs as well as their ability to address other emergent needs as they arise, like replacing appliances, repairing their car, fixing their roofs, or completing other necessary home repairs. It does nothing to help bridge the gap for those living in poverty who suffer food insecurity.

III. Eliminating Medicaid presumptive eligibility will harm struggling rural hospitals and their patients.

SB 17 proposes to remove the ability of hospitals and health care facilities to presumptively approve Medicaid for those without insurance who have little to no income. For many uninsured Ohioans, the loss of the ability to determine presumptive eligibility by their local hospital or health care facilities has the potential to be deadly anytime but seems especially harsh during a national health emergency like the present COVID-19 pandemic. Safety-net hospitals rely on presumptive eligibility to ensure that they are paid for expensive health care services they provide to patients who are eligible for services but have not enrolled. Without presumptive eligibility, those hospitals may be forced to either turn patients facing not-yet-life threatening conditions or provide medical care services for free. In either circumstance, patient care is also likely to suffer.

IV. Conclusion

Changes proposed by SB 17 would require technology upgrades and cause significant increases in administrative costs to state and county agencies which run on tight budgets in normal times, much less during a pandemic. Program integrity and efficiency, along with program services, would suffer, resulting in termination of much needed benefits to the most vulnerable Ohioans. SB 17 does not address the real economic needs of Appalachian Ohio and would ultimately adversely affect the Appalachian economy.

Thank you for your time and consideration today.

Respectfully submitted,

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SOUTHEASTERN OHIO LEGAL SERVICES PROGRAM