



## Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities

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Bureau of Services for the Visually Impaired  
Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation  
Division of Disability Determination

**Testimony of Kevin L. Miller, Executive Director  
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Senate Health Committee  
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Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Antonio, and distinguished committee members, my name is Kevin Miller, and I am the Director of Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD). I am pleased to present our 2022-2023 Biennial Budget for your consideration.

Moments after taking the oath of office, Governor Mike DeWine signed Executive Order 2019-03D, which established Ohio as a Disability Inclusion State and a Model Employer of Individuals with Disabilities. The budget before you reinforces his commitment and invests in Ohioans with disabilities.

Governor DeWine has entrusted OOD to lead the state's efforts to ensure Ohioans with disabilities are not left behind. According to current census data, there are more than 1.7 million Ohioans with a disability. Nearly 870,000 of those Ohioans are of working age. OOD serves eligible individuals with physical, mental, intellectual, and sensory disabilities, beginning at age 14. By working with community partners throughout the state of Ohio, we provide direct, personalized services to help individuals with disabilities find and retain meaningful work. Examples of these services may include career exploration, assistive technology, training, job placement services, and supports for the individual once hired. If an individual with a disability is unable to work, then OOD's continuum of service assists them through our Division of Disability Determination, which is 100% federally funded by the Social Security Administration (SSA).

### **Coronavirus Pandemic Shift**

Independence for Ohioans with disabilities is the mission that unites and drives all aspects of OOD. As the COVID-19 pandemic took its foothold in Ohio, OOD immediately responded to

ensure Ohioans with disabilities had the supports they needed to continue their path to employment and independence.

We retooled our vocational rehabilitation service delivery to provide uninterrupted remote counseling so that Ohioans with disabilities experienced no delays in their pursuit of employment. People with disabilities experience dramatically higher poverty rates than people without disabilities, and the pandemic hit these Ohioans particularly hard, leaving many of them with significant unmet needs, such as adequate food, housing, and access to other community services. OOD developed a new service: REACH (Refer, Educate, and Check-In), to enlist its service provider network to connect nearly 17,000 Ohioans with these needed resources.

OOD reached out to its more than 500 Employer Partners to identify urgent staffing needs. This allowed us to develop an “Urgent Jobs List,” centralizing openings with essential businesses to meet employers’ needs proactively. The list continues to be updated weekly for job developers throughout the state who provide one-on-one assistance to job seekers with disabilities. In the last 57 weeks, since March 2020, OOD has placed a total of 5,411 Ohioans with disabilities into jobs in health care, warehouse and logistics, customer service, food preparation, retail, manufacturing, and more.

The U.S. Department of Education noticed OOD’s resiliency and asked our agency to share our innovative practices with other states during a nationwide conference call. Other states and national organizations have asked OOD to share our approach to services for individuals with mental health and substance use disorders, virtual service delivery, the use of Lean principles, and our Vocational Apprenticeship Program.

To ensure Ohioans with disabilities who have applied for Social Security disability benefits did not experience delays, our Division of Disability Determination also pivoted. With approval from SSA, we continued to process disability claims for Ohioans with a terminal illness while simultaneously preparing for remote processing of all other disability claims. By early April 2020, the majority of our staff were processing disability claims from home. During the last year, we have received 130,739 new cases. Nationally, there is expected to be a 22% increase in the filing of Social Security disability claims, resulting in a greater demand for eligibility determinations. When SSA transitioned disability claims to a new case processing system, OOD was an early adopter, and

SSA entrusted us with training staff from Washington, New Mexico, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana, and Texas to ensure their success.

These are just a few of the examples of how OOD has shown leadership through resiliency, retooling service delivery, and getting results.

### **Investment in the Future of Ohioans with Disabilities**

The budget before you invests in the future of Ohioans with disabilities. It will allow OOD to sustain our current programs and services and ensure that the employment needs of all Ohioans with disabilities are met.

OOD's top priority is continuing to fulfill Governor DeWine's Executive Order to be a disability inclusion state and model employer. Building upon the resiliency we have demonstrated in response to the pandemic, OOD will play a pivotal role in supporting Ohio's economic recovery through assisting Ohioans with disabilities to get and keep jobs, and supporting Ohio employers to meet their workforce needs. To accomplish this, OOD's focus will be to avoid a waitlist for services so that all Ohioans with disabilities can receive services that lead to employment and independence without delay.

Additional priorities encourage and support individuals with disabilities to fully participate in the social and economic life of Ohio and engage in competitive integrated employment. Over the last two years, Ohio has averaged in the 92<sup>nd</sup> percentile amongst all vocational rehabilitation programs nationwide for job placement of individuals with disabilities, including two quarters during the pandemic. OOD will ensure that students with disabilities are supported to gain the skills needed to prepare for employment or post-secondary education, including new skills to adapt to the virtual work environment. We have a demonstrated history of serving Ohio's youth, as OOD recently ranked number two in the nation for total youth served under the age of 16. We will also implement strategies to reduce disparities among racial and ethnic groups to improve employment outcomes and provide accurate and timely disability determinations for Ohioans who are unable to work because of their disability.

## **Investment in the Local Business Community**

OOD's Vocational Rehabilitation counselors serve individuals with disabilities in all 88 counties in Ohio. Federal code requires that only OOD counselors can make eligibility determinations, develop a plan for employment, authorize services, approve payments, and complete case closures. We accomplish this by purchasing a wide range of vocational rehabilitation services from approximately 300 providers across Ohio. These providers offer services such as training to develop job skills, job development, and job coaching. With the changes experienced by OOD job seekers due to the pandemic, providers rapidly adjusted to minimize disruptions in service delivery, adopted safety protocols, and transitioned to the virtual environment. Strategic investment in our providers will ensure that they can deliver needed services that help individuals with disabilities get and keep jobs. Over the next biennium, OOD anticipates spending approximately \$74 million each year to purchase vocational rehabilitation services primarily from local Ohio businesses.

Supporting employers to diversify and strengthen their workforce by including individuals with disabilities is a vital component of Ohio's economic recovery efforts. When first appointed as Director, my team and I recognized the need to strengthen OOD's relationships with employers and created the Division of Employer and Innovation Services. This Division focuses on providing support for new and existing Employer Partners to meet their workforce needs by sourcing qualified individuals with disabilities for their open positions. Some examples of these partnerships include Avita Health System, Discount Drug Mart, Kroger, Liquibox, Procter & Gamble, Southern Ohio Medical Center, and Synchrony Financial.

During the upcoming biennium, OOD plans to host 30 virtual hiring events with up to 100 employers. In addition, OOD will provide 20 webinars for employers on disability etiquette, disability awareness, navigating Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and hiring practices to promote disability inclusion and worksite accessibility. Recent federal data indicates that 55.9% of individuals exiting OOD services are employed one year later, outperforming the national average by 28.2%. While job placement is an essential support to employers, retention is equally as critical. OOD will work with its more than 570 Employer Partners to retain qualified workers with disabilities by linking them to Vocational Rehabilitation services, providing worksite accessibility consultations, and other services to foster an inclusive work environment. The

Governor will recognize Ohio employers that excel in providing a workplace inclusive of individuals with disabilities each October during National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

### **Conclusion**

Nearly one in four people will acquire a disability at some point in their lifetime. For 50 years, OOD has assisted individuals with disabilities in obtaining employment and independence. Our focus and commitment to this mission remain steadfast despite the challenges of a global pandemic. Throughout these unprecedented times, OOD's demonstrated resiliency and leadership have continued to achieve results.

Because of Governor DeWine's leadership, Ohio is achieving the status of a disability inclusion state and model employer of individuals with disabilities. OOD is recognized by other states and the federal government as a national leader in disability inclusion. We have repeatedly been asked to share information about our successful models with other vocational rehabilitation programs; SSA has entrusted OOD to implement new systems and demonstrations; and OOD's Business Relations program was a national finalist for the Harvard Innovations in American Government Award.

OOD's budget represents a state investment of \$19.4 million in General Revenue Funds in each year of the biennium, which is a continuation of the current SFY 2021 funding level. With a generous federal match of \$3.69 drawn down for every \$1.00 in state matching funds, and because of our innovative programs, OOD is uniquely positioned to do its part in the state's economic recovery strategy by ensuring that individuals with disabilities have the opportunity to fully participate in Ohio's workforce. Supporting individuals with disabilities to gain employment improves their lives and Ohio's economy by increasing life expectancy, reducing reliance on government benefits, and generating tax dollars.

People with disabilities are your co-workers, neighbors, customers, friends, family members, and constituents who want the same opportunities as everyone else: a chance to demonstrate their abilities, be productive, and add value to their communities. The budget before you ensures that Ohioans with disabilities remain a priority by supporting them to find careers, stability, purpose, meaning, connection, and independence.

Our resiliency and ability to adapt during this pandemic, while continuing to serve Ohioans with disabilities, has separated Ohio from its counterparts across the country. With these results and our commitment to those we serve, I respectfully ask for your support of the investments that this budget makes in Ohioans with disabilities and your local districts. I would be more than happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.