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**Ohio Senate  
Health Committee  
House Bill 110  
Melissa Bacon  
Groundwork Ohio  
April 28, 2021**

Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the committee, my name is Melissa Bacon and I am the Policy and Advocacy Director at Groundwork Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on House Bill 110, Ohio's FY 2022-2023 budget bill as it relates to invited testimony today from the Ohio Department of Health (ODH).

As you may know, Groundwork is a statewide, nonpartisan advocacy organization that champions high-quality early learning and healthy development strategies from the prenatal period to age five, that lay a strong foundation for Ohio kids, families, and communities. Our vision is to make Ohio the best place to be a young child that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Groundwork is led by Executive Director, Shannon Jones, and governed by a robust steering committee of child-focused health and education experts from across the state.

**Groundwork is testifying today as an interested party to House Bill 110 to express continued support for the maintenance of state funds as proposed in the FY22-23 Executive Budget for ODH's services and initiatives that support pregnant women, young children and their families.** These investments in addition to federal dollars that support maternal and child health are more important now than ever in light of the toll the once-in-a-lifetime COVID-19 pandemic has taken on our most vulnerable children. Not only does the COVID-19 pandemic happen once in a lifetime, so does childhood. Our youngest children have a short, five-year period of critical brain development happening in the earliest years of their life to benefit from the love, care and learning they need to support their lifelong success. We often talk about the first 1,000 days setting the foundation for the rest of a child's life in recognition of over 80% of brain development happening in the first three years of life. Ohio's most vulnerable infants and toddlers have now spent a third of these precious 1000 days in this pandemic, enduring the stress, trauma and financial realities experienced by their families, caregivers and communities which deeply impacts their development. Focusing upstream on policies and investments in young children and families are demonstrated in many of the state investments through ODH including but not limited to Help Me Grow, Infant Vitality, Lead Abatement and the Lead-safe Home Fund Pilot Program.

**In addition to our request for continued support of the maintenance of state funds for ODH's services and initiatives that currently support the healthy development of young children, we ask that ODH and the legislature preserve and expand investments in Help Me Grow, voluntary evidence-based home visiting.** Healthy moms are the foundation of healthy children. Whether infants are born healthy and with the potential to thrive as they grow greatly depends on their mother's well-being. To have a healthy pregnancy and positive birth outcomes, women and their infants require access to appropriate clinical and non-clinical services before, during, and after birth.

In Ohio, between 2008 and 2016 pregnancy-related deaths occurred at a ratio of 14.7 per 100,000 live births. Over half of these deaths, 57%, were considered preventable. Additionally, Black women in Ohio died at a rate of more than two and a half times that of white women making up 34% of deaths but only 17% of births. This data is one of a series of metrics for which the pervasive racial disparity determines outcomes for both parent and child(ren). The experiences of both mothers and infants are inextricably linked, although they are often considered separately. This is particularly important when it comes to babies and women of color due to the intergenerational effects and lived experiences of racism. These factors are

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influential during and after pregnancy and affect their babies' start in life. We know that where these disparities and gaps present themselves during the prenatal period of a young child's development, they often persist across the life course beginning with these shameful outcomes for infants in Ohio:

- Nearly 12% of all Ohio births are preterm and this rate is 50-80% higher for moms receiving Medicaid compared to their higher income peers. 1 in 7 Black babies are born premature compared to 1 in 10 white babies.
- Black babies are more than 2.5 times more likely to die before their first birthday compared to white babies in Ohio.

Expanding home visiting services can help improve outcomes for both mom and baby. Voluntary, evidence-based home visiting brings early childhood development and health professionals to new parents to help them cultivate strong, healthy relationships with their children, give children the emotional security required for healthy development and provide parents with the knowledge to understand their child's needs, as well as their own. For those who elect to participate in a home visiting program, providers regularly visit the homes of vulnerable families (typically once per month), starting while the mother is pregnant and continuing through the first few years of the child's life. During this critical period of physical, emotional, and cognitive development for young children, parents receive support and guidance on how to create a safe, stimulating environment that promotes growth and learning. Voluntary, evidence-based home visiting programs allow motivated parents to learn how to succeed in their new role and provide children a healthy start with their first and most important teachers—parents.

More specifically, families enrolled in Help Me Grow home visiting services also receive maternal health and wellness screenings, child health and development screenings, parenting education and referral to medical and social supports. Home visitors also facilitate transitions to an appropriate programs and services that support child development including early childhood education programs. The state Help Me Grow investment is distributed from the state to counties to implement the program.

Upon taking office, Governor DeWine made a bold commitment to triple the number of families served in evidence-based home visiting. Ohio has made an incredible effort over the past two years to strengthen and expand evidence-based home visiting services through the implementation of a historic state funding increase in the state FY20-21 budget. Previously, the Ohio Department of Health received \$19,980,226 annually to support the Help Me Grow program. In state FY20-21 this number increased to \$30,289,149 and \$39,292,281 respectively, representing a nearly \$30 million increase over the biennium. The program is also supported by federal dollars including \$7.5 million from the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program and \$2.4 million from the Maternal Child Health Block Grant. The historic increase in state funding was made by Governor DeWine to begin to deliver on his promise of tripling the number of families served by evidence-based home visiting in the state of Ohio.

Under the Ohio Department of Health's leadership, vital investments have been implemented to strengthen the home visiting system, the quality of service delivery and capacity building to support the intervention reaching more families. Even considering the impact of COVID-19, an additional 1,115 families were served in 2020 compared to 2019 for a total of 10,765 families served in 2020. The home visiting footprint across the state of Ohio has also expanded to serve all but three counties as of 2020. While the leadership and growth of Ohio's evidence-based home visiting services have been critical to the success of the program over the past biennium, in addition to weathering the pandemic with quick and decisive action to safely transition services and meet the needs of families, more pregnant women and young children need the lifeline that is home visiting now more than ever. Now is the time to lean into the goal of tripling the number of families served by evidence-based home visiting. This will require the maintenance of the historic investment seen during the last biennium *and* additional state investment to support growth and the leveraging of additional federal resources.

**In the FY22-23 proposed budget, the Ohio Department of Health has increased the Help Me Grow investment over the biennium by a total of \$1.9 million (bringing the annual investment up to \$41,242,281). The increase in funding will allow for 500 additional families to receive home visiting services in the upcoming biennium. We are asking this Committee to double down on these critical efforts to serve more families with evidence-based home visiting by doubling the Governor's proposed increase through an additional \$1.9 million in FY23 (bringing the annual**

**investment to \$43,142,281). This will allow the program to serve 1,000 additional children during the upcoming biennium.**

Additionally, in order to fully realize the goal of tripling the number of families served, we continue to encourage ODH to leverage the Medicaid program so that eligible services can be reimbursed in a more cost-effective manner. The Ohio Departments of Medicaid and Health should continue to investigate and implement options for using Medicaid funding to support home visiting services during the upcoming biennium. Further, the federal financing structure for child welfare programming through Ohio's Family First Prevention Services Act plan will allow the use of Title IV-E funds for prevention programs such as evidence-based home visiting. This federal funding source should be coordinated and leveraged to utilize state funds more and Medicaid financing to reach more families. Lastly, we ask that ODH continue to collect data, analyze outcomes and evaluate programs from an equity lens. This data should be made to inform implementation of investments and make policy choices that eliminate barriers to access and the impacts of COVID-19 based on race, rural geography and age of the child.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and please allow Groundwork Ohio and our partners across the state to support your work during the budget process.