

The Arc of Ohio Testimony

The Ohio Senate Health Committee

April 29, 2021

Chair Huffman, Vice Chair Antani, Ranking Minority Member Antonio and members of the Senate Health Committee, my name is Gary Tonks. I am the President/CEO of The Arc of Ohio, our state's oldest and largest grassroots organization representing Ohioans with developmental disabilities and their families.

Our families organized in 1950 to create a support network for their children across the country. We established the first schools, the first adult day services, the first residential services; and, eventually fought to create what we now know as our County Boards of Developmental Disabilities.

While creating a system of support, our founders also fought for the civil rights of all children and adults with developmental disabilities. Until the 1970's, children with disabilities could legally be told to stay home or attend the separate schools we had created decades earlier. As the lead civil rights organization for children and adults with disabilities, The Arc sued and echoed that Separate is Not Equal, establishing what we know today as a federally guaranteed Free and Appropriate Public Education for children with disabilities and the formal creation of Special Education in Ohio and across the nation.

The Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities, our 88 County Boards of DD, and our private providers support almost 100,000 children and adults with developmental disabilities. Our schools educate over 270,000 children with disabilities.

One in ten families in Ohio are touched by someone with a developmental disability. Developmental Disabilities are a normal part of the human existence; and, we have come so far in the establishment of supports and education. But we have so far yet to go.

Fifty years ago, our families were pleading in budget testimony for screens on the windows of our state facilities, because their children were being ravaged by flies and mosquitos. Forty years ago we asked for funds to create community residential and day services and support to allow our loved ones to live in communities of their choosing.

During the last thirty years, we have asked for your support to reduce and eventually eliminate waiting lists for the growing numbers of children and adults needing assistance to live long and healthy lives.

This year is my 47th year as a member of The Arc. I have worked in four states over the decades as a volunteer, direct support professional, teacher, case manager, local director and state director. I know personally, as a family member and advocate, where we have been.

This body has heard our pleas over the decades. We are stronger and more supportive of our most vulnerable citizens than ever before in our history as a state, yet people still wait; supports go unused due to a lack of staff; and families still need your help.

We support initiatives within HB 110 such as Ohio Rise, that will support Medicaid eligible children with behavioral health needs; and, we are actively working with the Department of Medicaid to implement that program by January, 2022 to eventually support an estimated 55,000 Ohio children.

We support the budget initiative in regard to Mult-System Youth and will use our vast network in an effort to support these young people and their families.

I stand here with our partners, asking you to once more support us, as you have always supported us. Our partners will disagree sometimes, but I can tell you each person here, each organization represented, is dedicated to the same goal of providing quality supports to Ohioans with developmental disabilities and their families.

This time, our greatest need is to support our direct support staff so that we can provide quality services. We are at a critical point in our history where we have developed the infrastructure. We attract the best Ohio has to offer to meet our goals, but with wages so low and little or no benefits, our direct support qualify for Medicaid themselves. We have tremendous turnover and our loved ones cannot receive the supports they so desperately need.

We therefore request a 5% increase in rates to our providers, so we can attract and retain direct support staff necessary to support our loved ones.

Thank you for what you have done and what I know in my heart, you will continue to do on behalf of our loved ones. I am available for any questions.

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