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Ohio Senate Transportation Committee  
Senator Stephanie Kunze, Chair  
77 S. High St  
1 Capital Square, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor  
Columbus, OH 43215

Chairwoman Kunze, Vice Chairman Reineke, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Ohio Senate Transportation Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to **submit written testimony** about Ohio House Bill 74, the Ohio Transportation Budget.

I am a northwest Ohio resident with an unusual story (largely “invisible” disabilities), which I have given you below. I have been volunteering as part of the “Move Ohio” transportation advocacy coalition this spring, and while I am not a spokesperson for them, I want to add my voice to the chorus supporting their recommendations.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to my own story, I want to share this link citing numerous economic and safety benefits of public transportation.<sup>2</sup> Public transportation increases home values, attracts business, reduces road deaths, and creates jobs.<sup>3</sup>

At a time when we are debating whether the government should mandate a particular wage amount, or give Americans money directly, or both, I want to especially call your attention to the statistic that says that public transportation can save a household around \$10,000 a year in reduced car expenses. That would be \$10,000 back in the pockets of every Ohio family (or, \$10,000 freed to spend elsewhere in the economy).<sup>4</sup> But in many parts of Ohio, including northwest Ohio, the public transportation systems need a lot of modernization and improvement, to make this level of use possible.

Just as important, Ohio media are reporting that transportation is a barrier for some Ohioans seeking the covid vaccine.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.moveoh.io/our-letter>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.apta.com/news-publications/public-transportation-facts/>

<sup>3</sup> See 2, above

<sup>4</sup> See 2, above

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.news5cleveland.com/news/continuing-coverage/coronavirus/transportation-remains-a-barrier-to-vaccination-for-many-ohioans>

My story: As a young child and teen, I performed as well as or better than many peers in most core academic subjects, but I seemed delay in less-tangible areas, including socialization, emotional growth, and adaptive skills. I had had surgeries as an infant to correct complex heart defects, and this was the only cause we knew for the delays. Professionals always said I didn't fit any of the developmental diagnoses that they knew about, and I was getting "good grades," so I was never identified or treated or served as a special-needs student. It was assumed I would go to college, develop a career, and be self-sustaining. The first, and perhaps not only, but most significant time when I felt "behind" compared to my peers and knew something was wrong was my attempt in high school to learn to drive.

I was diagnosed with high-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder during my first year at Ohio Northern University. As you may know, ONU is located in a very small Ohio town, so I could get around campus and to local stores and such without a car. However, there were not many work, internship, or even volunteer opportunities within walking distance, either in Ada, or from my home in Toledo. The ONU career counselors and professors operated on the assumption that anyone could travel to or move to any job in the country.

Although I earned two professional degrees, graduating near the top of both classes, transportation barrier made it difficult, during and after college, to be competitive with typical (nondisabled) peers in job-seeking, numerous times and in numerous ways.

I didn't / don't qualify for county Board of DD services, because that system examines not only your diagnosis, but also specific functional impairments. Although the Boards of DD serve many people with an autism diagnosis, I don't / didn't meet the other criteria. It was as though, because I had thrived in the classroom and succeeded in college, I was seen as not disabled enough to need help. As a result, I don't have a waiver to pay a transportation provider and cabs, Uber and providers such as TLC are expensive to use on a regular basis.

I did qualify for services through the vocational rehab system, then called BVR and now called Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities. I received about 40 hours (total) of driving instruction, along with some evaluations. I did not perform well in the practice driving. The professionals who evaluated me diagnosed me with ADHD and generalized anxiety disorder as well as ASD, and identified the following issues I was having with driving:

- what they called "divided attention" – I had trouble paying attention to multiple things at once, as well as concentration in general
- reaction time and split-second decision-making
- peripheral vision
- Directions and navigating
- Size relative to the car, since the birth defects I had stunted my growth

The driving instructors chosen by the vocational rehab agency were supposed to be experts in teaching special-needs drivers, but I am not sure they understood my issues. The 40 or so hours of instruction I received were not enough to get to where I could pass the road test, and/or drive safely. The agency and my instructors questioned my motivation to learn, based on the fact that I was not practicing with my family in between their lessons. My family encouraged me

to overcome other kinds of limitations, but they were afraid of my causing a serious accident while practicing with someone who was not a professional instructor. I have met people with diagnoses similar to mine who have their driver's license – but have caused or been involved in multiple accidents.

There are some special factors about driving that make it harder to master through practice than other skills:

- The serious consequences of mistakes
- The need for a licensed driver be in the car for practice – the person with the disability can't just decide to do it all by themselves (although BVR told me I could). People with disabilities like mine who drive generally have a caregiver who is not only willing to practice with them, but insists on their learning to drive.
- The difficulty of finding the instruction needed – Some people with autism report getting their driver's license after about a year of daily practice. Voc Rehab / OOD would only pay for a relatively few hours, and lessons at the driving school, paid for privately, cost \$80 for an hour and a half. Further it is questionable whether many instructors autism and the related disabilities.
- The difficulty of practicing everything that can happen – different things happen on each individual drive

The use of public transportation reduces road deaths for everyone, not just people whose driving ability may be in question.<sup>6</sup>

I finished my second degree in 2007, and was employed part-time for most of the next several years, but I did not find a full-time job that had health insurance, fit my skills set, could accommodate my disabilities, and was accessible by public transportation, until the fall of 2016.

The Toledo Area Regional Transit Authority (TARTA) currently operates as what is known as a hub-and-spoke model – all routes from the suburbs lead to Downtown Toledo, and if your destination is not Downtown Toledo, you have to change buses at least once. And the agency has not been able to update its navigation technology. Because of the same disability issues I cited above, I find / found it hard to navigate this system, and eventually I was able to qualify for the paratransit service (TARPS.)

Even with TARPS access, transportation has caused problems with physical access to jobs; physical access to interviews; being able to schedule interviews on short notice; and even the ability to spontaneously attend social functions and network with those who have job connections. I am a good writer and English major and always envisioned myself as a journalist or community organizer, but it turned out, driving was necessary for most of these jobs.

I am telling my story in so much detail because I know it's not obvious when you meet me why I need public transportation – and I always get told I could learn to drive if I wanted to badly

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<sup>6</sup> See #2 above

enough – but also to show that transportation can “make or break” opportunities for people whose disabilities don’t prevent working, per se.

All of what I have experienced is also relevant for teenagers who may be too young to drive or may not have the ability to resources to buy a car. This will affect their ability to work, volunteer, and leave their screens and go out into the community (without spending everything they earn on a car.)

We hear so much about the need to “create jobs.” Let’s try creating a transportation system that makes existing jobs available to more people and reduces the cost of living and working by reducing the need for cars.

I have been told by people who advertise themselves as disability advocates that I should move to a big city. You may know that Toledo has set the goal of being the most disability-friendly community in the country. The current state of public transportation is not compatible with that goal. While it is difficult for people with disabilities to move away from their family or home base, public transportation is something non-disabled young adults consider when deciding where to live – many don’t want to have to drive all the time. As long as I have lived in Toledo, there have been concerns about young people who grew up here not settling here, i.e, “brain drain.”

In thriving metro areas elsewhere in the country, buses and trains are a convenience everyone uses. In Ohio, transit seems to be treated as a human service.

Since September of 2016, I have had a full-time administrative support job with a human services agency. Until March of 2020, when our work became remote, I took TARPS to work five days a week, as well as to other community activities. Travel time and wait time added hours to my work day, and to any activity. It is hard to spontaneously and independently go out and experience the community, because para-transit has to be booked far in advance. Once a trip is booked, it is very difficult to change the pick-up time or location if the time or location of an event changes.

People with disabilities like mine don’t always have a network of friends who can provide transportation consistently.

Some of the ways transportation affects your job are subtle, but have an impact. I worked several places that would spontaneously decide to bring food to the next day’s meeting. For me, this was stress, and more work, because I had to find a way to get to store on short notice. The time my boss had a family emergency at the time she was scheduled to host a table at a fair, I was not able to take over for her, since I had no way to pack and move the materials. The same boss would go out to buy food and supplies for our activities, and I realized that normally, the person in my position would do these errands, and that my work place is accommodating me by not making driving part of the job.

I believe if TARTA could be re-vamped the way the new leadership wants to do, with new technology for tracking and navigating, and more routes directly from the suburbs to non-Downtown-Toledo locations, I and many others with less-severe disabilities might be able to ride the fixed-line buses instead of using TARPS. People relying on a service like TARPS can’t stay

at work late or change their schedule when it would be helpful. This changes if they can ride a fixed-line system and buses are available at multiple times.

Further, TARTA serves the City of Toledo and six of its suburbs, but that is a pretty small portion of northwest Ohio. I essentially only have seven cities I can travel to and in. For every city in northwest Ohio not connected with TARTA, I and everyone else like me are would-be customers and employees that their businesses have lost, and volunteers and members that their communities and organizations have lost.

TARTA is the only major RTA in Ohio still funded by property tax. Some of the northwest Ohio Senators and representatives have introduced into the transportation budget bill language that will change the process, for TARTA, of becoming a county-wide service and moving from property tax to sales tax. Currently, we need to add a county as a member and we need the consent of all seven current members to add a member. Under the new language, we would need only a majority. I encourage the Ohio Senate to pass this language in the final bill. This will make it possible for TARTA to modernize and reform.

I have heard some opponents express the concern that Lucas County residents would buy vehicles out of county if the TARTA sales tax caused the overall Lucas County sales tax to increase. However, in Ohio, sales tax on a vehicle is calculated for the county where the vehicle is registered – so Lucas County residents would pay Lucas County sales tax regardless.

I do not speak on behalf of the “MOVE Ohio” coalition, but I support their recommendations:

- \$150 million per year in state funding for public transportation – this does not count federal money that is passed through Ohio with no state discretion to spend it. **MOVE’s \$150 million per year figure is based on a needs study by ODOT.**
- The legislation that created the Ohio Rail Development Commission is written to favor rail development in and among the “three C’s.” This should be revised so that the commission has the power to plan rail routes throughout Ohio.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony as a party interested in HB 74, or the equivalent Ohio transportation budget bill.

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