

Ohio House Behavioral Health and Recovery Supports Committee

May 19, 2022

HB 523 - Proponent Testimony

Commissioner Don Douglas

Chairwoman Carruthers, Vice-Chair Pavliga, and the members of the Behavioral Health and Recovery Supports Committee, thank you for allowing me to speak regarding H.B. 523 introduced by Representative D.J. Swearingen. My name is Don Douglas, and I am a County Commissioner in Ottawa County. Just in the past year, Ottawa County went through a major change with its local behavioral health system. With approval from the Board of County Commissioners in five counties (Ottawa, Erie, Sandusky, Seneca and Wyandot) and with approval from Director Lori Criss from the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, on October 1, 2021, Ottawa County joined the existing multi-county Board of Seneca, Sandusky and Wyandot counties. Previously, Ottawa County was part of a multi-county that included the Board of Erie County. On October 1, 2021, Erie County created its own single-county Board.

When Erie and Ottawa County Commissioners went through the process of creating a new Board (as in the Erie County situation) and merging with an existing board (as in the Ottawa County situation) one thing was clear: Ohio Revised Code 340 includes information on how county commissioners can remove a county from a joint district board, but it doesn't include specific information on how to create a new board or how to merge with an already existing board. H.B. 523 does that. We struggled immensely to complete the merger process since Ohio law lacked this information. The specifications needed to create a new board are very important to local county commissioners and should be added to the Ohio law.

H.B. 523 is extremely important to the residents of Ottawa and Erie Counties. Under the current Ohio law, a multi-county joint board district can place a levy on the ballot either as a county-specific levy by the county commissioners or it can be placed by the multi-county joint board as a district levy. The previous Erie/Ottawa Board had collected two district levies passed by the voters in both Erie and Ottawa Counties. Since the dissolution of their board, the two levies will be collected by the new boards until their expiration time. However, after that, the two existing levies will not be able to be renewed or replaced. The two boards will have to ask the voters in Erie and Ottawa counties for a new levy, which is listed on the ballot as "an additional tax." The purpose of the levies does not change from their initial intent. The voters approved these levies for the benefit of mental health and

addiction services for their community. The only thing that is changing is the Board district overseeing the local behavioral health services.

We are hoping that the two new boards will be able to renew their levies (as the intent and millage remains unchanged) instead of having to ask the voters for an additional tax. These two communities could lose a significant amount of funds due to an administrative change in the Board that oversees a particular community. I strongly recommend that this language added by Representative Swearingen be approved. The outcomes of running a new levy in these two counties could have major negative effects on current mental health and addiction services if the new levies will not pass.

H.B. 523 also provides an option for smaller sized boards. Under the current language, boards shall have either 14 or 18 members. There are fifty mental health and recovery services boards in Ohio. Some boards cover a single-county district with a population of 80 thousand or less, such as Brown County, Huron County, Erie County, Hancock County, Putnam County and Washington County. County commissioners should have the authority to reduce the number of Board members as specified in H.B. 523. In some Ohio communities, it is difficult to find 14 or 18 committed volunteer members to sit on these boards. The decision to reduce the number of members should be at the discretion of the local county commissioners. County commissioners are the local elected officials who interact with the local board and know what's best for the local community.

Additionally, H.B. 523 will allow County Commissioners to appoint two-thirds of the members to the local boards. Currently, County Commissioners appoint 55% of the members for an 18-member board and 57% of the members for a 14-member board. Slightly increasing this percentage is necessary and appropriate. Local County Commissioners are engaged in the local community and know which community members may be a good fit for the local board. County Commissioners attend board meetings of the local board. County Commissioners work closely with the Director of the local board to assist with various emergency situations or planning for services. We are in constant communication and collaboration with the local board. I am in full support of Representative Swearingen's percentage amount allocated to the County Commissioners.