

Testimony on SFY 24/25 Operating Budget House Finance Committee

Chairman Edwards, Vice Chair Ranking Member Sweeny, and esteemed committee members, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Holly Wulff-Cordes and I am the mother of a 20-year-old son with disabilities and we live in Bowling Green, Ohio in Wood County. His name is Reese Cordes.

I am very supportive of the budget initiatives outlined by Governor DeWine, Director Hauck of the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD), and Director Miller of Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD). On November 16th, 2002, my life, the life of my husband and our family's lives, and my newborn son's life were forever changed. There was no 'do over' button to push and no second chance at Reese's birth. Forever is a long time and my expectations of what Reese would be able to accomplish were shattered! Would he talk? Would he walk? Would he read? Would he write? No one knew and an uncertain future was our new reality. Forever uncertainty was a hard pill to swallow as new parents.

Our days were filled with specialist appointments and therapy of every kind alongside watchful eyes on our little one for typical developmental milestones. Developmental delays were revealed at an early age and interventions were in full force with therapies and Early Intervention (EI) services from our county board of developmental disabilities (DD). As time passed, very slow progress was made, and it was clear that school would also be a struggle. Unfortunately, school brought on a whole host of additional challenges that no parent should ever have to face. Countless, long Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings with a room full of team members, including a paid advocate at one point, were held as services were not meeting Reese's needs while he fell further behind his classmates. He was then diagnosed with epilepsy when he was in elementary school which came with additional trials and tribulations including the seizures being completely uncontrolled with medication through puberty, adding to our enormous stress level. To our family's great relief, by Reese's junior year of high school he met important academic benchmarks. He passed the academic assessment to enroll in a vocational school where he thrived. During an already stressful time, school wasn't our only focus. There were still countless therapy sessions, including the addition of equine therapy, specialist appointments, meetings with our county board of DD for services and the whole transition out of school and into adulthood process. We enlisted the services of OOD to work on finding employment and chose Work Leads to Independence (WLI) as his provider of employment services. This is our current

destination in Reese's life. He works at First Solar on a work crew two days per week and is actively searching for community employment. He was successfully employed at Meijer with support for over a year and a half so we know this goal will be achieved. He is also working on independent living skills with a goal of moving out of our home and living in an apartment or house with support. We are confident this will be achieved as well with the right supports in place. I haven't mentioned it yet, but our journey has been anything but accomplished by just the two of us as parents. We have had support from countless family members, doctors, therapists, county board personnel, OOD and Direct Support Professionals (DSP's).

My focus today is not on the uncertainty we once faced with our son, but on the uncertainty of his bright future because of the DSP wage crisis Ohio is facing. Reese's future is achievable, but with which will require immense support from DSP's. What is uncertain is whether that support will even be available given the current wage structure for DSP's. Currently DSP's are not paid a competitive wage and with employment opportunities plentiful, the disability field is in a precarious position of losing DSP's if they aren't compensated fairly. They can make the same or more at fast food establishments and for entry level positions. DSP's have the word professional in their title and yet are not compensated as such. I had the opportunity and privilege of being a DSP through college and, at that time, was compensated fairly for my role. The DSP wage simply hasn't kept pace with other employment opportunities. It is disheartening and quite frankly should be embarrassing to Ohioans that many DSP's live in poverty when they are entrusted with the lives of persons with disabilities, such as my son. I love my son and we are, in some ways, very lucky- my son can walk, he can talk, and he can read and write. But even with these abilities, Reese will still require services throughout his lifespan. It is unsettling as a parent knowing the services you know your adult child needs and will need in the future are in jeopardy. There will inevitably come a day when my husband and I will no longer be able to support and advocate for Reese and we can only pray there will be a system left to support him. With your support, Reese can also be a contributing member of Ohio's economy. I encourage this committee to approve the Governor's budget proposal for DODD and invest additional dollars into these vital services to raise direct support professional wages to at least \$20.64. This investment will help us recruit and retain the workforce needed to continue to provide quality services.

Thank you again for the opportunity and privilege to bring my concerns before you today.

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Reese at his graduation party