



March 24, 2023

**Testimony on SFY 24/25 Operating Budget  
House Finance Committee**

Chairman Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeny, and esteemed committee members:

I want to thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony today.

My name is Paul J. Soprano, and I am the Director of OakLeaf Services at United Cerebral Palsy Association (UCP) of Greater Cleveland. We are headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio, and serve individuals with disabilities, primarily in Cuyahoga, Lorain, and Medina Counties. We are a not-for-profit business that provides support for about 325 adults and 825 children with intellectual, developmental, and other types of disabilities annually. Our team of 175 employees are proud to provide essential services to Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

I lead the largest division of UCP of Greater Cleveland, OakLeaf Services, a center of excellence for adults. We serve people in two 8-bed intermediate care facilities for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ICF's), Adult Day Support, Vocational Habilitation, Career Planning, Group Employment, Individual Employment, and Non-Medical Transportation funded through the home and community-based waiver program administered by the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD). We also are a partner with Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD) offering job preparation, placement and coaching to persons with disabilities seeking integrated community employment. All our services have two overarching outcomes of Community Integration and/or Community Employment.

**I am very supportive of the budget initiatives outlined by Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for DODD and the budget initiatives outlined by Governor DeWine and Director Miller for OOD. The changing labor landscape and accompanying shortage of workers, including direct support professionals (DSP), threatens our ability to provide the critical supports on which the people we serve and their families rely. The budget proposed in HB 33 is a good foundation to help our system combat these many challenges.**

The day and employment services systems in Ohio are woefully underfunded, with waiver rates set in 2007, increasing by only 4% (in 2022). Our costs of doing business have increased tremendously in the past 15 years. In particular, we have had to increase DSP wages by 40% since 2020, to try to compete for talent with other industries offering higher wages for entry-level jobs. This has led our agency to operate with significant deficits that initially were covered by federal pandemic relief. But recently, we have had to tap our limited reserves to fund these wage increases, and this practice cannot continue for much longer. Despite offering increased wages, we still had an 60% turnover rate for DSPs in 2022.

Since the pandemic, we also were forced to close two day services locations, serving 60 individuals, and today, we are providing only about 60% of the services we did in early 2020 at our main location. Much of this capacity decline is due to our inability to adequately staff DSP positions. If reimbursement rates are not

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increased substantially, we will likely need to discontinue more services within the next five years. This would be a tragic outcome for our community, but especially for our 175 employees, and the more than 1,100 individuals who depend on us for their care and support.

UCP of Great Cleveland serves a specific niche, particularly in our group homes and day services—persons with very involved, complex physical and medical needs. In order to maintain health and safety for this fragile population, we need to employ a greater number of DSPs to safely care for them. Yet, as noted above, we have great difficulty offering competitive wages to attract those critical staff. Without access to our services, families would struggle to find specialized services and supports for their loved ones. Many would not be able to work to support themselves and their families, becoming dependent on government support and likely slipping into poverty.

The Governor's proposed budget initiative, under the leadership of Directors Hauck and Miller, is a great foundation to stabilize, reinforce and rebuild the services provided by UCP of Greater Cleveland. **We strongly urge this committee to approve the Governor's budget proposal for DODD and ODD and to invest additional dollars through budget amendment HC0656 into these vital services to raise direct support professional wages to at least an average of \$20.64.** Unlike other businesses, we cannot raise our prices to support increased wages for our team members. Only the legislature can make this long-overdue investment that will help us recruit and retain the workforce needed to continue to provide our vital, high quality services.

With your leadership, together we can ensure these services are available to the Ohioans who so greatly need them! Thank you again for the opportunity and privilege to bring my concerns before you, and if I can ever be of any help in this process, please let me know.

Sincerely,

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