



Kerstin Sjoberg, Executive Director of Disability Rights Ohio
Interested Party Testimony on House Bill 33
House Finance Committee
April 20, 2023

Chair Edwards, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written-only interested party testimony on House Bill 33 (HB 33) the state's biennial budget. My name is Kerstin Sjoberg and I am the Executive Director of Disability Rights Ohio (DRO).

DRO is the state's designated protection and advocacy system with the mission to advocate for an equitable Ohio for people with disabilities. DRO would like to applaud members of the committee for increasing funding for direct care worker wages in the substitute version of HB 33. This is an incredible step forward to ensure disabled Ohioans can live independently in their homes and communities. The home and community-based service (HCBS) system has been historically underfunded and now more than ever there is a critical need to ensure individuals can access care in their homes.

This testimony will address two (2) issues related to the substitute version of HB 33:

- 1) The need to increase wages for direct care workers; and**
- 2) Needed investments for the centers for independent living;**

I. Direct Care Worker Wages

DRO applauds the House Finance Committee establishing an average wage for direct care workers to \$17/hr in 2024 and \$18/hr in 2025. This is a necessary investment, but more is needed. Disabled advocates and caregivers are advocating for base wages of at least \$20/hour to ensure disabled Ohioans have the support they need to live independently in their communities. In addition, we applaud the committee for ensuring wage increases are applied across all service systems –Medicaid, Aging, and Developmental Disabilities. Currently, wages differ across systems leading to direct care workers to leave one system for another.

In addition to wages, to ensure the direct care workforce is stabilized there needs to be a mechanism establishing long-term wage growth and support for paid benefits. Currently, nursing homes have a structured rebasing system to increase rates but a similar mechanism does not exist for home and community-based services and supports. By establishing a similar structure, the legislature would be able to ensure sustainability in a system historically underfunded. And by increasing funding to provide benefits to these essential workers, Ohio will be able to attract a high-quality workforce supporting disabled people to live independently in their homes and communities.

II. Needed investments to the line item for centers for independent living to \$1,500,000

The House Finance Committee level-funded Centers for Independent Living (CILs) in the substitute version of HB 33. However, there continues to be a need to increase funding to CILs which provide independent living services for people with disabilities. CILs work to support community living and independence for disabled Ohioans based on the belief that all people can live with dignity, make their own choices, and participate fully in society. Currently, CILs receive \$500,000 from the state of Ohio, this is significantly lower than states in the region. For instance, Michigan CILs receives \$4,300,000 from the state while Indiana CILs receive \$2,462,384. There are currently 38 counties in Ohio that do not have access to all CIL services, many of which are rural counties. A \$1,500,000 investment into the Centers for Independent Living will help a larger reach by the CILs and an expansion of services across the state.

DRO applauds the House Finance Committee for increasing investments into Ohio's home and community-based service system through HB 33. These investments provide a foundation to ensure disabled Ohioans can live and work independently in their homes and communities. DRO also applauds this committee for your time and careful consideration of the incredible need to increase wages for the direct care workforce. DRO looks forward to continuing to work with members of the House of Representatives as the bill advances through the legislative process.

Thank you again for opportunity to provide interested party testimony in consideration of HB 33, please feel free to reach out to me or Jordan Ballinger, Policy Director at 614-466-7264 x135 or jballinger@disabilityrightsohio.org.