



ECHOING HILLS

Testimony to the Finance Committee
Ohio House of Representative
Timothy D. Neville
April 20, 2023

Chairman Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and members of the committee, my name is Tim Neville and it is my privilege to serve as President and CEO of Echoing Hills, a charitable organization that currently provides care and support to over 500 Ohioans with Developmental Disabilities through residential, recreational, educational and adult day services. Echoing Hills has a long and proud history stretching back for over 55 years. During all of that time, our mission has remained unchanged: *To revolutionize the lives of those we serve by creating opportunities for them to know and experience Jesus Christ.*

While our mission is the same today as it was when we were founded in 1967, the challenge to provide adequate care has changed dramatically in recent years. Like other developmental disabilities providers, Echoing Hills is unable to recruit and hire enough staff to provide the kind of care that ensures the dignity of each person we serve. To say the field of developmental disabilities has reached a staffing ‘crisis’ is a gross misrepresentation of the current situation.

As an example, even when we have been able to fill positions, over thirty percent of our direct service workforce at Echoing Hills is made up of employees with less than six months experience. As I am sure you know, it is the responsibility of these employees to learn the unique needs of those we serve. As with any relationship, learning the distinctive qualities that make that person who they are takes time—special dietary needs, bathroom and bathing requirements, medication needs, what makes them sad, and what makes them happy, are all things that cannot be learned overnight. When different employees rotate in and out of the lives of those we serve, it makes for a very unstable environment and affects their quality of life.

People with developmental disabilities deserve stability in life, just as we all do! It cannot be dictated by what is leftover. It has to be a priority. At Echoing Hills, we see each person we serve as a unique, irreplaceable human being, who God created in His image. They are fearfully and wonderfully made, and it is our responsibility collectively as the state of Ohio to serve our most vulnerable citizens the way they deserve – consistently with sufficient and qualified professionals. It is said, “Civilizations are judged by the way they treat their most helpless of citizens, and if you turn away, you extinguish your own light and deny your own warmth.”

Throughout this budget process, many legislators have asked if raising wages will actually help. I can respond that at Echoing Hills, because of our belief in the value of those we serve and because of our growing concern that we might no longer be able to serve them, in May of 2022, we took a bold risk to increase direct support staff wages by \$2.50 per hour to reach an average starting wage of \$16.50 per

hour. But this decision, made out of absolute necessity in order to recruit and retain staff, means Echoing Hills' long-term financial situation is unsustainable, with a \$1.9 million deficit in Calendar Year 2022 and a projected \$1.3 million deficit in Calendar Year 2023. While this decision has put Echoing Hills at financial risk, I have seen positive results. In March 2023, we are now on average 90% staffed across our programs and services versus 78% staffed before the pay increase. **Increased wages do make a difference.**

While the long-term viability of Echoing Hills is troubling enough, it is compounded by the stories of unmet need I hear every day. I will share just one.

Echoing Hills provides residential services, a home for people with developmental disabilities. Here, the degree of unmet need is staggering. Since March of last year, I have had over 400 referrals for our residential services and I am sorry to tell you that less than one percent of those needs was met by Echoing Hills. Recently, I learned of a mother and father, both working full-time jobs, who reached out looking for some help after school and during the summer months for their 7-year old son who has a g-tube to receive food and medications, and requires specialized care. It saddens me that I do not have the staff to help this family and this young man.

While I am grateful to Governor DeWine and appreciate the historic investment he has made to address the direct care workforce crisis in the DD system, I am certain the funding will not be enough to stabilize Echoing Hills. As I previously mentioned, we are already paying higher wages. Additional support from the General Assembly is critically necessary. A budget increase that supports a \$20 average hourly wage is needed to stabilize Echoing Hills and ensure future needs get met.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

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