



Testimony on SFY 24/25 Operating Budget
House Finance Health and Human Services Sub-Committee

March 13, 2023

Dear Chairwoman Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston & Committee Members,

HELP has been a leading provider of services for children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) since 1965. Our mission is to empower individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities through residential, day support, vocational, and summer education programs to choose services and opportunities as respected and valued community members. Beginning with a few dedicated families and one home for children, HELP has grown to care for more than 800 individuals annually in over 20 locations in Cuyahoga and Summit counties.

My work at HELP dates back 35 years, from an unpaid student intern to now President & CEO. Throughout the past 3.5 decades, I have witnessed many positive changes that have allowed individuals with IDD to thrive and reach their full potential. As an organization, we have positively impacted the lives of thousands of individuals and families. We cannot do this work alone and rely heavily on DODD funding and private philanthropy.

Many important factors influence how we fulfill our mission, one being the quality and quantity of our frontline staff. Worker shortages when providing services to a vulnerable population become critical as we navigate health and safety issues daily. Providers like HELP are locked into Medicaid reimbursement rates set by the State of Ohio. This means that we cannot raise the wages of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) without making program cuts elsewhere. Cutting any programming should not be accepted at any level. Support staff are quitting the field every day at alarming rates since other industries offer significantly higher entry-level wages. Efforts to retain current DSPs and attract new ones are severely impacted by the lack of competitiveness driven by the current reimbursement system. Moreover, to adjust to the staffing crisis, we made a difficult decision to close three homes, and needed to turn down individuals with multi-level needs because we did not have adequate staffing to provide suitable care for them.

The Governor's proposed budget initiatives are a positive first step in retaining a well-trained, quality workforce that we can rely on to offer consistent, valuable, meaningful services for the people whom we serve. The current situation leaves human resources constantly trying to fill the same positions over and over. We know that a steady workforce ensures that the people we serve have some stability, creating happier and healthier lives.

We welcome the opportunity to meet or talk via phone at the number below if you should have questions or require additional information. To learn more about HELP, please visit our website – helpfoundationinc.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tamara Honkala", written over a white background.

Tamara S. Honkala
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