



May 8, 2023

Dear Senate Finance Committee Chairman Dolan and Senate Finance Committee Members,

My name is Julia Felts, and I am a citizen of Dublin, Ohio, and an employee of Columbus Speech & Hearing Center, a foundational non-profit that has served our community for 100 years. I consider all of us fortunate to have at work in our state the Ohio School for the Deaf, the Ohio School for the Blind, and the Columbus Speech & Hearing Center.

I am writing today to ask for your support for the recently passed HB 33, specifically, GRF ALI 415515, DeafBlind Fund, which provides funding for a Support Service Provider (SSP) program for DeafBlind Ohioans. The SSP Pilot Program provides critical services for adults who are DeafBlind. DeafBlind individuals are those with severe hearing and vision loss.

Columbus Speech & Hearing currently runs a small SSP program here in Franklin County. The program is small due to the restricted access to the services as well as the restricted funding. The current access to services is limited to those who are 60 years or older, who reside in Franklin County, and who live in independent housing. The services are offered on a sliding fee scale based on participant income, which can create additional barriers for those needing SSP services. The services are typically approved for between 6 to 15 hours per month.

The services provided through the pilot program will allow a DeafBlind individual to engage in their home life and community; maintain independence in their day-to-day tasks, such as shopping, paying their bills, getting to medical and personal appointments; and attend community and social events. SSP services benefit the mental health and wellbeing of DeafBlind individuals by increasing social and environmental access, increasing cognitive stimulation, and decreasing isolation and depression – all of which can significantly reduce healthcare costs. As individuals are living longer, the number of people with combined hearing and vision loss will progressively rise, and the demand for DeafBlind services will continue to grow.

The advocacy for this SSP pilot program is the direct result of grassroots efforts of several DeafBlind citizens. They have collaborated to identify the needs of their DeafBlind community. They have spent countless hours visiting and educating legislators on these needs as well as the benefits of SSP services. They have identified their provider of choice, and they are in support of the proposed budget. This is a program by the people and for the people.

Again, we are fortunate in our state to have intervener services in the schools as well as strong support for the Ohio School for the Blind and the Ohio School for the Deaf, providing services for individuals from birth to 21 and 22 years, respectively; but what happens when these

individuals graduate? And what about those students who are *both* Deaf and Blind. DeafBlind adults are profoundly underserved in our local community as well as our state.

The \$100,000 proposed budget of the SSP Pilot Program has been judiciously reviewed and it will allow for:

- Direct SSP services for DeafBlind adults in Ohio;
- Training for Support Service Provider employees to include communication requirements of essential visual and environmental information, performing navigation assistance, and abuse prevention;
- A realistic pay rate for specialized SSP employees trained in ASL, tactile ASL, and DeafBlind navigation assistance;
- A part-time SSP coordinator to manage consumer referrals, staff recruitment, and policy adherence; and
- Data collection and analysis to determine the outcomes of services and substantiate the need for SSP services.

We can achieve incredible outcomes of increased independence and improved health with funding of the SSP Pilot Program, GRF ALI 415515, DeafBlind Fund.

SSP services are vital in empowering DeafBlind citizens to live independently; to live physically, emotionally, and socially more active lives; to reduce isolation and depression; and to advocate for themselves. Funding this program will further demonstrate continued support of DeafBlind individuals as they are given increased access to engage in and contribute to our community.

I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,



Julia Felts

Program Manager

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