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Interested Party Testimony for HB 33
Tim Johnson, Policy Advocate
Ohio Poverty Law Center
Ohio Senate Finance Committee
May 25, 2023

Chair Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee. My name is Tim Johnson, and I am a policy advocate with the Ohio Poverty Law Center. The Ohio Poverty Law Center's mission is to reduce poverty and increase justice by protecting and expanding the legal rights of Ohioans living, working, and raising their families in poverty. We appreciate the hard work and effort that both you and your House colleagues have put into the Operating Budget. As you work to prepare the Senate version of the budget, please keep in mind the following provisions that will support lower-income families.

The Ohio Poverty Law Center Supports the Following Provisions:

Funding for legal aid—The last several state budgets included a modest General Revenue Fund (GRF) appropriation of \$500,000 each year for legal aid. The House doubled this funding to \$1 million each fiscal year.

Funding for food insecurity—The Governor proposed \$24,550,000 each year for the Ohio Association of Food Banks. Given the high need with the end of the SNAP emergency allotments, the House wisely invested another \$15 million per year for the Ohio Association of Foodbanks. They also included a \$10 million appropriation for the Cleveland Foodbank in 2024 to cover a capital expansion. The appropriation for the Children's Hunger Alliance increased from the Governor's proposed \$1,175,000 each year to \$3,750,000 per year.

Free school meals—The House included a provision that will allow students who are eligible for reduced-priced lunches to receive the meals for free. The language requires the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) to reimburse the difference between the federal free reimbursement rate and the reduced-price breakfast reimbursement rate and pay the total cost for reduced lunches.

Ohio Works First—The House expanded eligibility for cash assistance under Ohio Works First to include any eligible pregnant woman—a change from current eligibility, which includes pregnant women who were at least six months pregnant. This change brings OWF eligibility in-line with Medicaid eligibility and will help low-income Ohioans better understand and apply for benefits for which they qualify.

Medicaid coverage—The Governor's budget included the expansion of Medicaid coverage for pregnant women and children under the age of 19 up to 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL). The House made this proposal even better by requiring the Medicaid Director to apply for a waiver to provide continuous Medicaid enrollment for children from birth through three years of age.

Doulas—The House budget includes language to establish a five-year program to cover doula services to a Medicaid enrollee provided by a certified doula with a Medicaid provider agreement. The Medicaid director shall complete an annual report regarding the program outcomes, including data related to maternal health and morbidity and an estimated fiscal impact.

“Benefit Cliff” pilot program—Using some remaining state fiscal recovery funds from the American Rescue Plan, the House provides \$10 million each year for the Actionable Help and New Dignity for Upward Progression (A HAND UP) pilot program. The language requires the Department of Job and Family Services to establish the two-year program. Under the pilot program, the Department shall assist program participants in transitioning into the workforce as they become ineligible for public assistance benefits.

Ohio Poverty Law Center Requests You Restore the Following:

Lead poisoning prevention—The House budget decreased lead poisoning prevention funding as proposed by the Governor from \$10.8 million in 2024 and \$11.65 million in 2025 to the current level of funding at \$6.5 million per year.

While Ohio has been working hard to address lead poisoning it is important to remember that:

- Ohio children test positive for elevated blood lead levels at twice the national rate. We are number #2 in the country for the number of kids with elevated blood lead levels.
- Ohio’s housing stock is old. 2/3 were built before 1980 meaning they could contain lead hazards. Over 427,000 children under 6 live in these homes.

Ohio is still working to transition to a primary prevention approach which fixes lead hazards before a child is poisoned, rather than after. The additional funds proposed by the Governor would have supported Ohio’s Lead Safe Home Fund grant program, helped to enforce the renovation, repair, and painting rule, and provided additional funding to delegated health authorities to help with increased caseloads. The legislature has done great work supporting lead poisoning prevention in previous General Assemblies, now is the time to double down on your previous support, not back away. We urge you to support amendment SC1029 and restore the funding to the lead abatement line item.

Ohio Poverty Law Center Would Ask You to Consider the Following Additions:

Re-open Rural Legal Aid Offices—Please add \$2.5 million per year for Legal Aid to re-open offices and provide more services to low-income Ohioans in Southeast Ohio and other underserved areas in Ohio. Several legal aid offices were forced to close due to the economic downturn, yet there remains a significant need for legal services in our rural areas. This funding will allow Southeastern Ohio Legal Services (SEOLS) to reopen offices in Lancaster, Zanesville, and Marietta and Advocates for Basic Legal Equality (ABLE)/ Legal Aid of Western Ohio, Inc. (LAWO) to reopen an office in Mansfield and a new location in Celina. These new locations will allow legal aid programs to serve low-income Ohioans better and more efficiently as well as make legal aid services more accessible.

Funding for Medical-Legal Partnerships—House Bill 7, which is pending in the House Families and Aging Committee, includes policies and funding for a comprehensive approach to address maternal and child health. Some of the provisions of HB 7 are included in Sub HB 33. One provision establishes a \$1 million per year grant program to fund Medical-Legal Partnerships (MLP). This provision is not currently in the budget. By adding this grant program to HB 33, you will provide resources to expand the reach of current successful partnerships of lawyers and doctors in the healthcare setting to resolve legal problems for lower-income families that commonly increase health care utilization and adversely affect health.

Increased resources for food insecurity—We support our partners requests for additional resources for to address food insecurity including:

- an additional investment of \$10 million per year for the Ohio Association of Foodbanks
- \$21 million per year to provide a \$50 per month state-supplemented minimum SNAP benefit to all Ohioans age 60 and up.

Ohio's Operating Budget represents the state's priorities over the next two years. Members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee, you have a chance to improve the budget even further and ensure that it protects and uplifts vulnerable Ohioans. We hope you will consider our outlined requests, and I am happy to answer any questions you have at this time.