



May 23, 2023

**Testimony on HB 33
Senate Finance Committee**

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and esteemed committee members:

I want to thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony.

My name is Paul J. Soprano, and I am the Director of OakLeaf Services at United Cerebral Palsy Association (UCP) of Greater Cleveland. We are headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio, and serve individuals with disabilities, primarily in Cuyahoga, Lake, Lorain, and Medina Counties. We are a not-for-profit business that provides support for about 325 adults and 825 children with intellectual, developmental, and other types of disabilities annually. Our team of 175 employees are proud to provide essential services to Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

OakLeaf Services provide residential intermediate care facilities for individuals with intellectual disabilities, day, and employment services through the home and community-based waiver program administered by the Department of Developmental Disabilities (DODD), as well as employment and vocational rehabilitation services through Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD). All our services have two overarching outcomes for persons served of Community Integration and/or Community Employment.

I am highly supportive of the budget initiatives outlined by Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for DODD and the budget initiatives outlined by Governor DeWine and Director Miller for OOD. The changing labor landscape and accompanying shortage of workers, including direct support professionals (DSP), threatens our ability to provide the critical supports on which the people we serve and their families rely. The House-passed version of HB 33 is an excellent foundation to help our system combat these many changes.

The day and employment services systems in Ohio are woefully underfunded, with waiver rates set in 2007, increasing by only 4% (in 2022). Our costs of doing business have increased tremendously in the past 15 years. We have had to increase DSP wages by 40% since 2020, to try to compete for talent with other industries offering higher wages for entry-level jobs. This has led our agency to operate with significant deficits that initially were covered by federal pandemic relief. But recently, we have had to tap our limited reserves to fund these wage increases, and this practice cannot continue for much longer. Despite offering increased wages, we still had an 60% turnover rate for DSPs in 2022.

Since the pandemic, we also were forced to close two day services locations, serving sixty individuals, and today, we are providing only about 60% of the services we did in early 2020 at our main location. Furthermore, we have been forced to put a hold on accepting new job coaching referrals from OOD and we placed 30% fewer persons into jobs, depriving local businesses access to an untapped labor pool to fill key positions in their companies. This has had an adverse impact on the wider Northeast Ohio community.

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Much of this capacity decline is due to our inability to adequately staff DSP positions. If reimbursement rates are not increased substantially, we will need to discontinue more services within the next five years. This would be a tragic outcome for our community, but especially for our 175 employees, and the more than 1,100 individuals who depend on us for their care and support.

UCP of Great Cleveland serves a specific niche, particularly in our group homes and day services—persons with very involved, complex physical and medical needs. To maintain health and safety for this fragile population, we need to employ a greater number of DSPs to safely care for them. Yet, as noted above, we have great difficulty offering competitive wages to attract those critical staff. Without access to our services, families would struggle to find specialized services and supports for their loved ones. Many would be forced to stay home to care for their family members and not be able to work to support themselves and their families, becoming dependent on government support and slipping into poverty.

The budget initiatives for Ohioans with disabilities, guided by the leadership of Director Hauck and Miller, will reinforce, and stabilize and rebuild the services provided by UCP of Greater Cleveland. We encourage this committee to invest additional funds on top of the House-passed budget for DODD and maintain funding for OOD at the House-passed levels.

With your leadership, together we can ensure these services are available to the Ohioans who so greatly need them! Thank you again for the opportunity and privilege to bring my concerns before you, and if I can ever be of any help in this process, please let me know.

Sincerely,

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