



**Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
House Bill 33**

**Cuyahoga County Office of Early Childhood Testimony
March 22, 2023**

Chairwoman Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is John Ladd and I serve as a Program Officer for the Cuyahoga County Office of Early Childhood – Invest in Children.

I am here as a proponent of elements within the As-Introduced version of House Bill 33, the FY 2024-2025 state operating budget.

Invest in Children is keenly interested in HB-33 due to our work as Cuyahoga County's public/private partnership that mobilizes resources and research to ensure the well-being of all young children in Cuyahoga County. As an early childhood system, we urge you to carefully consider the needs of families with young children in the important budget decisions now being made. Specifically, we encourage you to support the following three items.

Support Ohio's current and future workforce by expanding initial eligibility for publicly funded childcare (PFCC) from 142% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to 160% of the FPL, as is contained in Governor DeWine's proposed state budget. This will keep Ohio families with young children working by helping parents afford childcare and ensuring more children in low-income families have access to high-quality care. Such a change would represent needed incremental progress and would bring work-enabling support to the parents of an additional 15,000 kids. It is important to note, that while this proposed raise is important, appreciated, and fully supported, it would

still leave Ohio in the bottom of half of states for PFCC eligibility. For Ohio to remain competitive with other states in workforce development, and support to young families, we need to get PFCC eligibility to at least 200% of the FPL at some near-term future point. The early care and education system is still reeling from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on all aspects of the system, and that impact is perhaps most visible in the current and crippling shortage of trained early childhood educators and caregivers who staff early care and education classrooms. That said, we believe the system can presently accommodate the increase in demand that an eligibility raise to 160% would generate.

Secondly, support the establishment of an Ohio Department of Children and Youth. When serving the needs of families with young children, it is important that all the areas of support for the child and the family are aligned in both purpose and strategy. What families need and want are programs that are effective, stable, and easy to access. This goal is further realized when funding streams, priorities, regulations, and administrative processes are streamlined, coordinated, and aligned behind a common set of goals. This facilitates an early childhood continuum of services – something we've seen success with because it offers greater opportunity for integration and collaboration among programs. The gained efficiencies, and elimination of duplication, would benefit early care and education in Ohio – a critical system of essential workers that is built on a patchwork of funding streams and processes under the purview of multiple state and federal agencies. And what is true here for early care and education, is true across our other areas of service and programs for families. Other types of programs that would fall under this proposed new state agency would include: early intervention, home visiting, infant health, early childhood mental health services and others. Many of the families accessing any one of these programs, also access one or more of the others as well. Let's get Ohio to a place where this whole set of needs are under the coordinated work of one state agency.

While there is considerably more to say about the welcomed investments supporting families seen in the proposed budget, I'll limit my remarks here today to one last item. We ask you to support expanding Medicaid coverage to 300% of the Federal Poverty Level for pregnant mothers and children. This would be a substantial statement that pregnant women are recognized as

uniquely vulnerable to changes in healthcare access that can happen when they take a job or return to work. More than half of all births in Ohio are covered by Medicaid, meaning this critical support reaches all of Ohio. It would also make an important statement that children will continue to have health insurance when parents return to work at one or more jobs that do not provide health care benefits and/or household income otherwise begins to rise. A child's next visit to the pediatrician should not be in jeopardy because a parent accepted a slightly better paying job, or earned a merit raise for a job well done. A closely related issue is that of continuous enrollment that maintains Medicaid coverage for children 0 to 3 regardless of short-term fluctuations in household income. A young child will always be best served when they have a consistent medical home throughout their early childhood. Raising Medicaid eligibility to 300% of the FPL for children up to age 18, combined with continuous eligibility for the youngest children, makes provider consistency and positive health outcomes much more likely and accessible.

Thank you for your time and attention. Please let me know now, or in the future, if you have any questions or need of additional information.