

Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
House Bill 33
Rebekah Johnson, Parent from Lorain County
March 14, 2023

Chair Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, my name is Rebekah Johnson, and I am a parent from Oberlin, Ohio in Lorain County.

Today, I join with fellow parents and advocates from across Ohio in thanking you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony on House Bill 33, Ohio's FY 2024-2025 budget bill, regarding the state publicly funded child care program.

I am a mother to five wonderful and bright children ranging in ages from 10 years to 5 months (Xavier (10), Xenieya (7), Xylahna (6), Xemar (4), Xoie (5 months). My husband Mario and I live with our children in Canton, Ohio. Mario and baby Zoie are here with me today.

Each of my children, except for my baby have attended Oberlin Early Childhood Center with support from the state's publicly funded child care program throughout different periods of their lives when our family needed help. They attended this program until they were 3 years old and then attended another Center in my town named Kendall Early Learning Center. I am very grateful for both of these programs who have been critical for our family to grow and thrive. The Oberlin Center is one of the very few programs that accept my voucher and care for infants—it's where I feel most comfortable taking my baby. I have been unable to secure care for her, however, even though I have a child care subsidy because the Center does not have the staffing to provide care for her in the infant classroom. Hiring and retaining early childhood professionals is very difficult and I know that child care programs don't get paid enough to cover the cost of infant care. Because my family relies on only my husband's income now and he makes \$17.00 per hour as a shift leader at Pizza Hut, we are well below 100% of the Federal Poverty Level and so do not have a copay. Every month we struggle to keep our lights on and pay the rent. If it was not for our SNAP benefits, we would not be able to provide food for our family. I know it would be better for the child care program if I could pay private pay fees because to serve my baby, they must be willing to accept \$200-\$300 less for care every week.

Child care providers are limiting how many publicly funded children they will take due to the drastically reduced rates they are paid. On top of that, they are paid months after the services are provided. On average our preschool provider informed me she gets paid about 1.5-2 months after she provides care to our son, Xemar. To make matters worse, they are paid on attendance and not enrollment. For example, in the K-12 system they are paid for the child all year long even if the child only attends for a month. ODJFS child care programs are paid only on the hours the child attends on a weekly basis, even though they still require the same staffing and expenses if a child who is publicly funded doesn't attend school any given day.

I have learned a lot about the struggles of child care providers and understand that the numbers just don't make sense, but it is difficult and hurtful to hear that my baby is not a

priority because we live in poverty. Mario and I are working as hard as we can and doing our best. We just want her to have an equal opportunity to succeed in life and not be wrestling with the same vicious cycles my husband and I find ourselves in as we raise our family.

My child care search continues. It has to. I must find child care so that I can return to the workforce and provide for my family alongside my husband. I met with a home-based program last week and am trying to remain hopeful that I can find a trusted program to care for my baby even though, in reality, I know we have very few choices because of our income and the inadequate infant care in my community. Despite the very real challenges, I am still excited that my career is picking back up. In fact, I just started school two weeks ago. I am taking courses through the Early Childhood Resource Center of Lorain County. I understand this course is funded by the local job and family services agency with grant funding that will support me in getting my Child Development Associate credential so that I can be part of the early childhood workforce that is so desperately needed. This program allows me to earn \$13 per hour to complete a 450-hour course then apply to be hired at a child care to work full time to support our family. I want to be part of improving this system that is so critical for my family and I'm grateful for this opportunity after being pushed out of the workforce since the COVID pandemic.

As you can imagine, I was elated to take on this opportunity but my excitement quickly turned to panic when my local child care center informed me that they did not have enough staff in the infant room to take on any more babies. If I can find child care that allows me to successfully complete this program, I know I will still have continued challenges because early childhood professionals make so little, especially those serving publicly funded children. It just doesn't make sense that I could get my associate degree in something that does not entrust you with a child's life and make far more money. That is why I am committed to be a parent, a professional and an advocate—things must change.

So many other families suffer and struggle alone. I can think of countless stories of family, friends and neighbors that have struggled deeply with finding access to child care. Without more equitable access to child care, we will all continue to suffer—our kids, families and communities. Thank you for listening to my story and please make our family's problems your priority by investing in our shared future through increased state investment in infant-toddler child care capacity, preschool, the early childhood workforce and increased eligibility for child care programs.