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Testimony on SFY 26/27 Operating Budget House Health Committee

Chairwoman Schmidt, Vice-Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani, and esteemed committee members, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Quiana Tolliver, and I am the Director of People & Culture at I Am Boundless Inc. For over 40 years, Boundless has proudly provided health and humans services to thousands of Ohio residents and their families. From residential support and vocational habilitation to primary care and behavioral health, our approach to whole-person care celebrates each individual and empowers them to become active participants in the communities where they live, work, and play. Today, Boundless provides services to over 5000 individuals and employs over 3200 people. We have a presence in 77 of Ohio's counties.

First, I want to express our deep gratitude for the historic investment in disability services that was included in the last state budget. The funding increase helped providers like us recover from a decade-long crisis that led to devastating workforce shortages. Organizations like Boundless have made significant progress throughout the past two years.

We decreased vacancies by 83%, improving access to care for individuals with disabilities. With more staff in place, we have been able to reduce wait times, increase service availability, and ensure individuals receive the consistent, high-quality support they need. This improvement supported more timely interventions, better continuity of care, and enhanced overall well-being for those who rely on these essential services. Investing in workforce stability isn't just about filling positions, it's about improving lives.

We expanded services to individuals we previously had to turn away due to staffing shortages. By filling critical DSP positions, we have expanded our Day Program services, allowing us to serve more individuals who previously faced waitlists due to staffing shortages. This growth ensures more individuals have access to the care and engagement they need, strengthening our ability to serve the community.

Many of our frontline staff members saw a 10-20% increase in their wages, providing them with greater financial stability and a more sustainable livelihood. This increase has allowed them to better support themselves and their families, reducing financial stress and improving overall well-being. As a result, they can be more engaged, focused, and able to provide even greater support to the individuals we serve.

Our current average Direct Support Professional wage is \$18.19 per hour. The increased wages have made the position more competitive, attracting more applicants and allowing us to build a stronger more stable workforce.

Last budget I testified to the House Subcommittee on Health and Human Services. In my testimony at the time I spoke about the recruitment and retention challenges we faced as an organization. Since then, the increase in wages has truly helped us attract and retain top talent, strengthening our workforce and improving the services we provide. We have made tremendous

progress and are in a much better place today, but there is still work to be done to ensure long-term stability and continued growth in supporting individuals with disabilities.

I want to express our appreciation to Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for honoring the commitment made in the last General Assembly by using General Revenue Funds (GRF) to maintain the rate increases that were funded in part with ARPA dollars. This investment provides much-needed stability for providers and the people they serve. However, the budget does not include any additional funding to ensure wages continue to remain competitive despite the continued workforce crisis and rising costs. The last rate increase took effect in July 2024, and without action from this body, providers face a nearly four-year gap in rate adjustments—putting us right back in the crisis we just emerged from.

While we have made significant progress since the passage of the last state operating budget, there is still progress that we can make together. To ensure Ohioans with disabilities and their families have access to the care they need, we urge the General Assembly to first and foremost: maintain the Governor's investment in ICFs, Multi-System Youth, and Technology First initiatives.

In addition to this, we would like to bring attention to the fact that there currently is no mechanism in place that provides our industry with long-term financial stability. While the investment this body has made in our service system has allowed providers to recover from a crisis level position, there is still no long-term solution to our funding model. We would like to work with and partner with this General Assembly to explore fiscally responsible and future focused ideas that could provide long term sustainability.

In the absence of a long-term funding solution, we must continue to return each operating budget cycle to ask for increases that keep up with inflation and workforce demands, specifically in relation to services funded via the HCBS Waiver.

Investing in DD services ensures Ohioans with disabilities receive the care and support they need to live full, independent lives, in their communities. We look forward to working with you to build on the progress you've made and keep Ohio moving forward.

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.