

House Children and Human Services Committee

Testimony of Kari Jones, President & CEO, ElevateDD
February 27, 2025

Chair White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett, and Members of the House Children and Human Services Committee,

My name is Kari Jones, and I am the President & CEO of ElevateDD, a statewide advocacy platform dedicated to increasing authentic inclusion for people with developmental disabilities by amplifying voices, supporting families, illuminating opportunities, and launching innovative solutions.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today on the proposed investments in House Bill 96 and the urgent need to improve child care access for children with disabilities in Ohio. For decades our work has centered on supporting families navigating the complex challenges of accessing high-quality education, care, and community inclusion.

Child Care Access & Economic Stability for Families

Child care is an economic necessity that allows families to work, contribute to their communities, and provide stability for their children. Yet, families of children with disabilities face systemic barriers when seeking care, leading to financial strain, career disruptions, and negative impacts on family well-being.

According to our recent study surveying 768 families in Ohio:

- **More than 60% of families with children in paid child care** reported being told that providers could not accommodate their child due to behavioral, medical, toileting, or physical needs.
- **Over 70% of families** had to switch child care providers because their child's developmental disability needs were not met.
- **62% of families who could not place their child in child care** cited the inability to find a provider capable of meeting their child's needs as the primary reason.
- **More than half of surveyed families** experienced job disruptions or missed career advancement opportunities due to child care restrictions.

These are not just numbers—they represent real families forced to make difficult choices. Families who must reduce work hours, leave the workforce entirely, or endure financial hardship because they cannot find or afford appropriate care for their children. I believe that increasing the threshold for Publicly Funded Child Care to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level for families whose children have disabilities is critical in providing recognition and access to families who need it most.

Strengthening Child Care Support for Children with Disabilities

We acknowledge and appreciate the proposed increase in child care eligibility under House Bill 96, which raises the threshold to 160% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). This is a necessary and meaningful step. However, it is critical that children with disabilities continue to receive enhanced eligibility. Families caring for children with disabilities experience significantly increased financial burdens associated with therapies, medical care, and specialized services. Maintaining higher eligibility for this population recognizes these unique challenges.

Additionally, Governor DeWine's child care voucher program, introduced earlier in 2024, extends support to families up to 200% of the Federal Poverty Level. However, this program does not include designated slots for children with disabilities. We strongly urge the committee to establish reserved slots to ensure these children do not continue to be disproportionately excluded from child care services.

Furthermore, Ohio's Child Care Development Fund Plan is currently out of compliance with federal requirements because it does not provide targeted grants or contracts for children with disabilities. Ensuring compliance with these federal standards is an opportunity to increase access and create a more accessible child care system that serves all Ohio families.

The Role of Early Intervention in Child Development

We also commend the proposed increase in funding for early intervention services, recognizing the vital role they play in the lifelong development of children with disabilities. Research consistently shows that high-quality early intervention leads to improved educational outcomes, greater independence, and reduced long-term support costs for individuals with disabilities. Investing now in these programs ensures a stronger future for Ohio's children and families.

Families' Voices Must Lead Policy Change

Our survey and community engagement efforts make one thing clear: families are the best source of information on the challenges they face. Their voices must shape policy decisions. Consider these firsthand accounts from parents navigating Ohio's child care system:

- *"We try to work opposite shifts, which negatively impacts our marriage."*
- *"Between hospitalizations and appointments, jobs have fired me or let me go."*
- *"I owned my own successful business, but I had to close it due to lack of child care options."*

These stories are not exceptions; they are the unrelenting reality that many Ohio families face every day.

Ohio Can Improve this System

Ohio has a unique opportunity to lead in ensuring child care is accessible, inclusive, and equitable for all children, including those with disabilities. We urge Ohio to:

1. Maintain enhanced child care eligibility for children with disabilities.
2. Establish designated slots for children with disabilities in state-supported child care programs.
3. Address Ohio's compliance gap by providing targeted grants and contracts for infants, children in underserved areas, and children with disabilities.
4. Continue investing in early intervention as a proven strategy for long-term success.

Thank you for your leadership on these issues, and for your commitment to Ohio's children and families. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today.

Kari Jones
President & CEO, ElevateDD