



Esteemed Members of the Conference Committee:

The Greater Cleveland COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund (RRF) is a coalition of Northeast Ohio partners with one simple goal: to help protect the communities we serve from the devastating effects of the coronavirus pandemic. The RRF was established in March 2020 to strategically complement government's response to the outbreak and address basic needs including childhood well-being, food security, housing stability, workforce development, and public health. Since its inception, the RRF has included more than 80 philanthropic, corporate, and civic organizations and 2,300 individual donors throughout Cuyahoga, Lake, and Geauga Counties. To date, the Fund's partners have granted nearly \$16 million to over 300 nonprofit organizations in Northeast Ohio and continue to look for areas of unmet need.

We recognize this committee, and the entire membership of the Ohio General Assembly, for their efforts to create a state operating budget that improves the lives of all Ohioans. However, we believe there is more to be done to achieve that vision.

As the budget nears its final stages, we want to ensure this legislation supports, rather than harms, our community's ability to meet the needs of residents as we continue to grapple with and emerge from the lingering effects of the pandemic. Therefore, we respectfully submit the following concerns to the Conference Committee for HB 110, the biennial state operating budget.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING


We urge this committee to oppose and delete language added in the Senate substitute bill that would require affordable housing projects restricted by federal law in rent amounts and income eligibility to be appraised for property tax purposes at the full market value without factoring in rent subsidization. This language would greatly threaten low-income housing opportunities across the state at a time when widespread housing insecurity has pushed us—the local philanthropic community and our government partners—to the limits of our ability to support safe and affordable housing options. This provision would also have a chilling effect on community development broadly and undermine Cleveland's, and Ohio's, ability to attract real estate investment and promote economic recovery from the pandemic. The amendment undermines necessary development, blocks access to safe rental options, and could potentially exacerbate homelessness in our communities.

MEDICAID REDETERMINATION

We firmly believe that the Senate's provision requiring the Ohio Department of Medicaid to redetermine Medicaid eligibility within 60 days of the suspension of the federal public health emergency would limit access to health care among those made most vulnerable by the pandemic. Resulting delays in care would threaten the ongoing public health response and burden the health care system. This abrupt shift in policy would also impose significant administrative strain and waste rather than prevent fraud and excess spending. What is more, this provision would likely have a pronounced effect on coverage for older adults, persons with disabilities, and children. We urge the committee to remove this harmful language.

CONSCIENCE CLAUSE

The Rapid Response Fund also takes issue with the Senate-added provision to allow medical professionals, health care institutions, or payers to decline services that violate their moral, ethical, or religious beliefs. This broad language would essentially allow any health care entity or employee to deny individuals a whole host of medically necessary services on vague moral grounds not specific to health issues at-hand. This



represents a significant threat to the health, safety, and well-being of LGBTQ individuals in the state, especially those living in underserved urban and rural communities where care is less accessible. In Greater Cleveland, the Conscience Clause has the potential to negatively impact the health of around 4% of the population—or more than 60,000 individuals that are estimated to identify as LGBTQ. Access to care for all has been threatened throughout the past year. Ohio cannot afford to enact legislation that risks access to care for thousands of people across the state.

STEP UP TO QUALITY

We respectfully request that the committee maintain the as-passed by the Ohio House version of the state's publicly funded childcare provision, with specific regard to the Step Up to Quality (SUTQ) Program. The Senate substitute bill removed the provision that requires publicly funded childcare providers be SUTQ-rated. In Cuyahoga County 42% of children are considered not “on track” for kindergarten readiness, and many rely on publicly funded childcare for essential learning and development supports in their critical early years of life. Dismantling the SUTQ eating system jeopardizes Ohio's best chance at ensuring children enter kindergarten ready to learn. We cannot risk the future of our communities by putting low-income children at a further disadvantage while simultaneously harming our educational system at its very foundation. If Ohio is to establish and maintain a stable and well-prepared workforce, we must support all families and invest in quality childcare for all our children.

MUNICIPAL TAX

We are also concerned with the Senate substitute provisions regarding municipal income tax collection. Instituting a policy that allows for retroactive tax refunds would create a massive administrative burden across public and private sectors. Ohio cities, many with administrative departments that were under-resourced prior to the pandemic, have struggled to address novel issues created by the coronavirus while still maintaining essential services for their residents. This provision would greatly endanger the financial wellbeing of our cities and obstruct recovery statewide as we look to return to normal in a post-COVID world. We must support our localities to ensure that they have the resources necessary to continue to effectively serve their residents.

BROADBAND

We urge this committee to restore critical funding included in the House version of the budget for broadband infrastructure expansion. Expanded broadband development is imperative to ensure access to reliable, high-speed internet for every Ohioan and to help modernize a workforce that is compatible with the technologies of the 21st century. One-quarter of homes in Cuyahoga County have no internet access. And, as we have seen throughout this pandemic, broadband access is not only vital to the institutions upon which our communities depend—schools, hospitals, businesses—but to individuals in those communities as well, bolstering employment, transportation, and other basic needs. We must not leave Ohioans behind, but instead continue to invest in this most critical infrastructure. Our communities and families, especially those in need, deserve our full support in advancing universal digital inclusion.

We thank you again for your respectful consideration of these critical provisions and for your hard work in finalizing this legislation for the benefit of Ohio. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions.

Sincerely,

The Greater Cleveland COVID-19 Rapid Response Fund

