Testimony on Sub. HB 153, The Biennial Budget
Before the House Finance Committee
May 2, 2011
By Scott Britton, Coordinator

Chairman Amstutz, Ranking Member Sykes, and Members of the Committee: My name is Scott Britton, and I am coordinator of Advocates for Ohio’s Future, a statewide coalition of health, human service, and early care & education organizations. AOF works to maintain vital public services at a level that meets people’s basic needs and protects Ohio’s most vulnerable populations.

The 20 statewide associations that make up our steering committee and the 200 organizations across the state that have endorsed our mission are grateful for some of the changes made in the substitute budget bill. Specifically, we appreciate restoration of funding for Federally Qualified Health Centers. We also commend your decision to designate additional funding for PASSPORT, food banks, and kinship permanency and to alter the Tangible Personal Property Tax calculation and phaseout.

Other features of the sub bill were more disappointing, including the $3 million reduction to Help Me Grow. We are particularly concerned about the lack of any significant changes made in behavioral health. More than any other issue of ours, mental health and addiction services cut across all systems and will play a role in planned system reforms: corrections, prescription drug abuse, education, long-term care, and so much more. Behavioral health care is woefully underfunded - both Medicaid and non-Medicaid services - if it is to play a meaningful role in these system reforms. Likewise, county social services, from child welfare and JFS offices to ADAMH and developmental disability boards, face stark reductions that could cripple their ability to meet rising caseloads.

As the budget moves forward, we ask you to remain open to additional support for safety-net programs that serve Ohio’s most vulnerable. On the map included with my testimony, you have only to look at the 70 counties with more than one-quarter of their population living at or below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level and the 26 with more than 35 percent of their population living at or below 200 percent FPL to see the need your constituents face. We fear that these sobering statistics will not improve dramatically over the next two years. Many of the children, families, seniors, and people with disabilities behind these statistics likely will not see a return to prosperity until after the next biennium. We face a moment in Ohio’s history that demands bold leadership to prioritize the basic needs of the vulnerable and those struggling because of the recession.

On behalf of Advocates for Ohio’s Future, I appreciate your time today. Our coalition members stand ready to work with the legislature to craft budget amendments that will remedy these concerns.