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Ohio Budget Brings Relief to Child Welfare, But Levy Concerns Linger

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For child welfare advocates across Ohio, the state's newly signed \$60 billion budget brought a wave of relief but also a ripple of uncertainty.

Governor Mike DeWine's approval of the spending plan this week restored millions in funding for child welfare and youth housing programs, a lifeline for counties struggling to provide adequate care and placement for vulnerable children. At the heart of the plan is a \$55 million boost to the Child Protection Allocation fund, designed to help counties cover the rising costs of placing youth in foster care, kinship homes, and residential centers.

It also sets aside \$20 million for the development of regional child wellness campuses modeled after Cuyahoga County's soon-to-be-completed facility, aimed at expanding housing options, keeping children closer to their communities, and, crucially, preventing them from sleeping in government offices due to a lack of placement options.

"This is a step in the right direction," said Scott Britton, Assistant Director of the Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO), which represents county child welfare agencies. While the \$20 million is less than the \$30 million originally proposed by DeWine, Britton believes the slower rollout presents an opportunity to learn and improve the model for future investments.

Cuyahoga County's Director of Health and Human Services, David Merriman, echoed the optimism. He said the county plans to apply for a portion of the \$20 million to support its \$13 million wellness campus, which still needs up to \$20 million annually to operate.

But even as state leaders celebrate these investments, questions remain. Some advocates worry that language buried in the budget may still limit counties' ability to raise money through replacement property tax levies, a key tool for funding services.

Angela Sausser, executive director of PCSAO, praised DeWine for rejecting earlier proposed levy restrictions that could have jeopardized local funding streams. Counties like Cuyahoga rely heavily on Health and Human Services (HHS) levies, which bring in over \$300 million annually to support a wide range of programs from child protection to addiction services and senior care.

Still, Britton warned that a closer look at the bill's final language is necessary. "We're kind of waiting with bated breath," he said, as legal teams comb through the budget for any provisions that may still threaten future levy efforts.

County officials say they're reviewing the new policies carefully. With legislators set to reconvene in September, there's still time to address concerns before year's end.

For now, many in Ohio's child welfare system are cautiously optimistic, grateful for renewed support, but watching closely to ensure nothing vital slips through the cracks.