

# Gathered Around Our Table

## Giving Thanks to Ohio Families



## **About Groundwork Ohio:**

*Groundwork Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization committed to championing high-quality early learning and healthy development strategies from the prenatal period to age five, that lay a strong foundation for Ohio kids, families, and communities.*

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## SECTION 1

# Gathered Around Our Table



**"This is the power of gathering: it  
inspires us—delightfully—to be more  
hopeful, more joyful, more thoughtful:  
in a word, more alive."**

*~ Alice Waters*



# Letter from Our Leadership

With the arrival of the holiday season, I have been taking inventory of the past year at Groundwork Ohio. As I reflect, the word that continues to be at the forefront of my mind is GRATITUDE. As we begin to set our tables and prepare to gather with our family, friends, and neighbors, I am struck by our collective efforts to make space at Groundwork for so many of our cherished stakeholders to become effective advocates for young children. From our family to yours, thank you for building this table and gathering with us during 2022.

Among the many diverse relationships we have invited to our table, none compare to the time, care, and critical connections we have made with the experts—our Ohio families. In June 2021, we shared our plan for the Center for Family Voice at Groundwork Ohio through Amplifying Family Voice to Advance Equitable Outcomes for Young Children. This report was compiled after six months of research and planning to determine how we could authentically engage families in state policy development and advocacy.

Our vision for this Center included a commitment to best practices. In 2022, we began planting the seeds to build a strong foundation for our Family Action Network.

A highlight of the year was celebrating with more than one hundred Family Action Network members at the Statehouse in May. It was an honor to meet the first cohort of families face-to-face. We gathered, listened to one another, and demanded that policymakers listen to

Ohio families. This powerful meeting—the first of many—invited hope into the hearts and minds of fellow families, advocates, and legislators. The Statehouse was simply joyous. We sat at the table together, inspired by our collective commitment to ensure every child in Ohio will be healthy and ready to learn.

I am pleased to share with you this report on the Groundwork Ohio Family Action Network. As we prepare to begin 2023 together, I invite you to get to know these families and community leaders as we have—each of them holds the hopes and dreams of their children and our shared future together as a state.

As you reflect upon the past year and share time around your table with those you love, please join me in celebrating and centering Ohio's families through this season and into the new year.

**Warm Personal Regards,**



**Shannon Jones**  
Groundwork Ohio, President & CEO

# What Is the Center for Family Voice at Groundwork Ohio?

The Center for Family Voice at Groundwork Ohio is a “center for excellence” dedicated to authentically engaging Ohio parents and families in the policies and practices that impact the healthy development of their children. The Center is an ongoing, multi-year committed learning process focused on eliminating disparities in systems that serve pregnant women, young children, and their families. Ultimately, the Center will drive programmatic and policy changes at the local, regional, and state levels by integrating the family voice into the decision-making process of Ohio’s family-serving systems.

The Center for Family Voice is an innovative statewide response to ensure authentic family voices are included in the development of policies and practices that deeply impact pregnant women, young children, and their families. We know there are certainly local programs and entities that may include family engagement as an aspect of service delivery or an evidence-based intervention. Groundwork Ohio is working to build the infrastructure to center family voices to inform public policy, with the opportunity to influence national work in this developing area of policy, engagement, and advocacy.



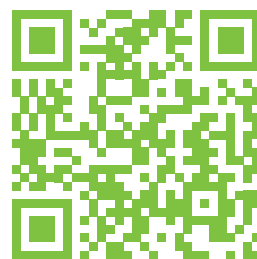




Read the “**Amplifying Family Voice to Advance Equitable Outcomes for Young Children**” report at [GroundworkOhio.org/familyvoice](https://GroundworkOhio.org/familyvoice) to learn more about what to expect from the Center.



Amplifying Family Voice to Advance  
Equitable Outcomes for Young Children



Watch the video





# THE AMPLIFICATION EFFECT IN ACTION

*The Center for Family Voice implements core functions of the Center in alignment with its principles and values.*

## Build & Enhance Capacity of families & local stakeholders by:

- Increasing their skills & knowledge
- Expanding their connections
- Building confidence & self-efficacy

## Empower Local Stakeholders to:

- Connect family engagement to services
- Engage families in diverse roles including as co-creators of solutions
- Honor family contributions
- Create inclusive cultures

## Develop Effective Partnerships

between families, local stakeholders, & Groundwork Ohio that support shared policy goals & advocacy so that policymakers see families & effective partnerships as assets.

## Advance Policy Transformation & Improve Outcomes

for young children & their families through our effective partnerships.

*Groundwork Ohio develops and supports the Center for Family Voice. It integrates the expertise and activity of the Center in all its strategies.*

**Source:** The Amplification Effect is the theory of change developed for the Center for Family Voice and is informed by the totality of Groundwork Ohio's research and interviews with diverse stakeholders, but draws heavily on and utilizes concepts from two existing frameworks: 1.) "The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships," developed by Dr. Karen Mapp 2.) "The Ripple Effect Theory of Change," developed by the Parent Leadership Indicators Project.



## SECTION 2

# Relationships Are Built Engaging Ohio Families



**"If you plant, you harvest."**

*~ Filipino Proverb*

# At Groundwork Ohio...

we believe that parents and families are the experts of their own experiences and know what their babies and toddlers need to thrive. Too often, however, families aren't included in the policymaking process that deeply affects their lives and the lives of their young children. ***Groundwork Ohio is committed to changing this because every family deserves to be respected, valued, and heard.***

To help elevate the voices of Ohio parents and families in the policymaking process, Groundwork Ohio is building a statewide Family Action Network. The Family Action Network will be a powerful and diverse coalition of Ohio families. We want to invest in their leadership and provide them with opportunities to engage with policymakers on the issues that matter most to their families.

## The Family Action Network is committed to:

- *Ensuring families are valued, respected, and heard.*
- *Building a powerful and diverse coalition of Ohio families from across the state.*
- *Investing in the leadership of families and providing opportunities to engage in policy decision-making.*

In partnership with local community-based organizations, Groundwork Ohio recruited Family and Community Ambassadors as part of the Network. Family Ambassadors are a valuable, powerful, and diverse coalition of families from across the state who are elevating their voices to help shape the policies and programs that impact their children and their families. As a thank you for their time and expertise, Groundwork Ohio provided Family Ambassadors a stipend upon completion of the virtual training sessions and for attending the May 18th event at the Ohio Statehouse. Groundwork also engaged Community Ambassadors to connect and support families through their participation in the Network. These Community Ambassadors worked in direct service organizations in local communities that serve families. Often these community professionals are caregivers themselves and benefit from the programs that they now administer.

### COMMUNITY AMBASSADORS

Organizational staff who do community-based work to connect and support families.

### FAMILY AMBASSADORS

Members of the Family Action Network who care for at least one child under 5.





## 11

# Building & Enhancing Capacity of Families

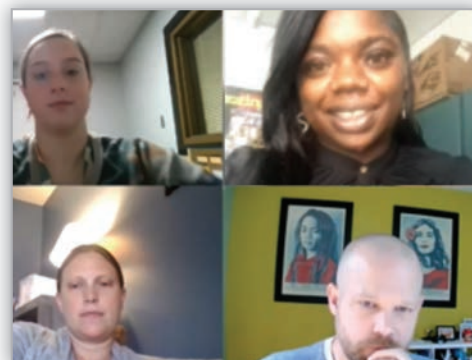
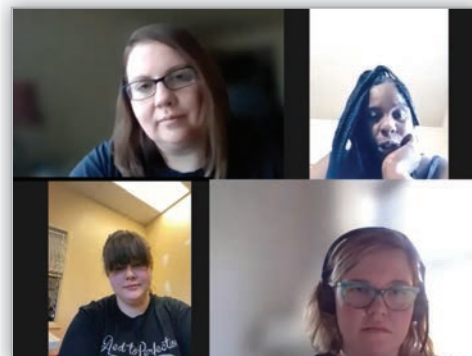
## From Theory to Practice



Groundwork Ohio invested in the Family Action Network Family and Community Ambassadors to increase their skills and knowledge, expand their connections and build their confidence to engage in advocacy. We worked closely with Design Impact (DI) to design and facilitate a three-part virtual training session (90 minutes each). A total of nine sessions were offered to provide families with multiple times and days to engage that worked for their schedule. DI also helped prepare the Groundwork team to co-facilitate sessions and met with them often to plan the training.

DI is a nonprofit social innovation firm that collaborates with community groups, social service agencies, philanthropists, and other social changemakers to apply creative and inclusive approaches to complex social challenges. Their approach combines creativity, equity, and leadership practice to address system-wide inequity. They do this in part by amplifying and empowering unheard voices in the design of their own solutions.

DI used human-centered design to approach the training, a problem-solving process that empowers the community as designers, to help them take something that is and make it how it ought to be. The process is known for its ability to define, explore, and solve problems. A diverse continuum of tools was utilized to support learning and community building and capture feedback from families.



### Workshop 1

#### **Building Relationships** April 11-15, 2022

##### GOALS:

- Create a welcoming atmosphere
- Orient families to the project
- Explore hopes and hurdles

### Workshop 2

#### **Storytelling** April 25-26, 2022

##### GOALS:

- Identify the connections between families
- Build families' story of self

### Workshop 3

#### **Logistics & the Story of Now** May 9-11, 2022

##### GOALS:

- Set expectations for the Launch Day on May 18th
- Practice sharing stories with policymakers



## SECTION 3

# Stories Are Told Getting to Know Our Families



**"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."**

*~ Maya Angelou*



# The Hopes & Hurdles of Our Ohio Families

When families were asked during the first workshop to consider their hopes and the hurdles that stand in the way, five themes emerged. In the second workshop, families reflected on these themes and voted on which resonated with them the most. The themes below are presented in order of priority.



## 1 PROVIDING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO RESOURCES

Families hope for better awareness of, and access to, essential resources. Resources meant to support families often feel out of reach.

*"We have all these programs, but no one qualifies."*

*"Several families in my groups shared how they qualified for programs and interventions for their children, but could not access due to lack of staffing or availability in the community."*

*"It's hard to find services for my children with special needs. More funding is needed to support children with special needs like mine."*

*"I'm not alone in my struggles."*

## 2 HEALING FROM BROKEN SYSTEMS

Families face systems unable to meet their needs and that can add to their trauma experienced. There is a desire to change these systems and provide more meaningful support to children, including mental health services.

*"Mental health is important to the whole family: Moms, dads, children. When a caregiver's mental health suffers, the family suffers."*

*"You either care about the whole child, or you don't. The way people receive support is out of whack...It's not helping families who need help."*

*"You are punished for being poor."*

*One parent shared how her family has private insurance, and services her son needs are being denied—which would otherwise be covered by Medicaid.*





3

### FINDING SAFETY & STABILITY FOR MY FAMILY

Families desire for economic stability, to become self-reliant, and to find safer and more secure environments for their children to grow. However, stability can be elusive as debt and benefits programs that tie increasing income to a reduction in coverage makes this a difficult path to travel.

*"I had to ask my employer to reduce my wage by \$2/hr so that I could qualify for childcare."*

*"All families love their kids and want to provide the best for them."*

*"I want my children to thrive in the community and be safe."*

4

### BUILDING A VILLAGE AROUND MY FAMILY

Families hope for a world full of connections, love, and people. A strong social network makes raising children easier, but our families reported a lack of community support. As a result, families feel strapped for time and stretched to meet the needs of their children.

*"As a parent and caregiver, we put ourselves last... Why is it such a struggle for us to fight, fight, fight?"*

*"Mothers have huge roles to play and society is working against us most of the time. We are missing the village."*

*"Lack of space and time for myself to dream and do my soul's calling outside of motherhood. My nervous system is burnt out and I feel like I am hanging on all the time vs thriving. With community connection, families can thrive."*

5

### BELONGING TO A WORLD WE HAVE THE POWER TO CHANGE

Families hope to raise children who will be accepted by and able to change the communities in which they live. They share a vision of advocacy that includes their children's voices.

*A mother was adamant about her daughter having a sense of belonging.*





# Family Ambassador Stories

**Holly Ungar**  
Utica, Ohio



"Twenty years ago, I was a single mom with a 3-year-old little boy. The day I found out I was pregnant I was 3 months out of high school. I had a scholarship to Baldwin Wallace. I thought my world was crashing underneath me. I didn't know what I was going to do. I was still living with my parents. How was I going to raise a child? I was scared. Back in 2012, I was diagnosed with uterine cancer and was no longer able to have kids. And I've always wanted to have a big family. I married my husband in 2014, and he'd never had kids. He'd never been married. And foster care was one way for us to have that bond together of kids. We've had 65 foster kids in the last 10 years. I have 10 amazing kids. I only gave birth to one, and we adopted 9 of them. We have 3 sets of 3. How do you split those kids up? I can't lay in bed at night knowing that I have 2 siblings and the other sibling somewhere else. We got into foster care to give a child a warm place, give them a bed, give them hope, give them dreams."



Watch the video







**Raya Anderson**

Dayton, Ohio



"I received Amir when he was two months old. I was at church one day, and his grandmother got up with the pastor and said that she had just gotten emergency custody of her newborn grandson. But he needs a full-time mom, and she can't do it. In 24 hours, I had this two-month-old baby named Amir. When I got Amir through Children's Services, I thought, you know, I had a little different thought pattern—single mom, never been a mother before—that there was going to be some more assistance or guidance, and there really wasn't. How to figure out navigating everything about how to get him benefits to what he applied for, what he could apply for, what he was entitled to. Navigating the court system because it was Kinship Care and not foster, and trying to advocate for him, and advocate for myself to keep custody of Amir because I deeply felt that was the best place for him to be. I'd made Amir this promise the day I got him and looked in his eyes that I would do the best for him."



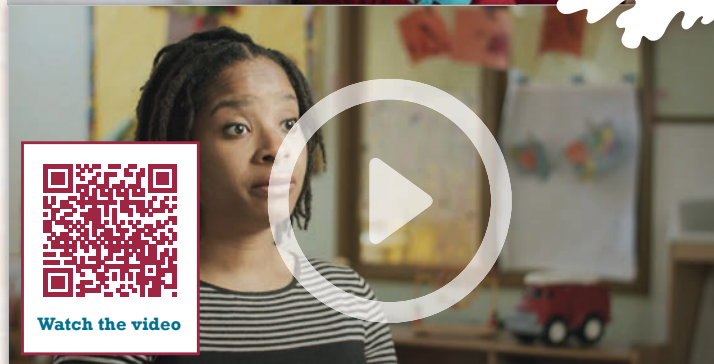
Watch the video

**Charis Davis**

Portsmouth, Ohio



"With my oldest child, the first time I saw his face my prayer was that he would be a mighty man of God and an asset to his community and to our society. I don't want him to be somebody that society sees as bad or less than. That's what scares me for my children, they're Black men. Being middle-class, we scrape every month because we make just enough money to not receive those benefits. I think that there needs to be a bridge to help with those situations for middle-class families and having that, it would be able to get more people in the workforce because they won't be scared to have their benefits taken away as soon as you get that new job."



Watch the video



## SECTION 4

# Memories Are Created

## Groundwork Ohio Family Action Network Launch



**"What if, today, we were  
grateful for everything?"**

*~ Charlie Brown*





**Our Families**



**Our Stories**



**Our Statehouse**



## May 18, 2022

Roughly 700 Ohioans made their way into the Statehouse on May 18th to launch Groundwork Ohio's Family Action Network. Together, this diverse group of families and community members touch every corner of our great state. As families with young children, we are committed to investing in their leadership. We want every family to be respected, valued, and heard!

- *There have never been so many infants and toddlers in the "People's House."*
- *64 legislative offices from across the state were in attendance to listen to family stories and experiences.*

Early childhood stakeholders stood alongside more than one hundred Family and Community Ambassadors from Groundwork Ohio's Family Action Network—including other parents, grandparents, foster parents, kinship caregivers, community partners, and young children—to celebrate the power of our collective voices and share their stories with state policymakers.

Families were greeted with remarks from Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, who expressed the importance of elevating the voices of families and encouraged the sharing of stories.



- *The audience viewed the Family Action Network Launch Video, which shared Groundwork Ohio's commitment to elevating the voices of families with young children.*



Watch the video

Bridget Flaherty, Founder of LORE Storytelling, shared her own story and the power and importance of listening. Bridget also moderated a bipartisan panel of state legislators that discussed how they have listened to families in the past and why it is important for families to share their voices and experiences with policymakers.

During lunch, the Atrium was buzzing with big and little voices engaged in conversation as families shared their stories and concerns with state policymakers.

After lunch, hundreds of early childhood stakeholders, community leaders, advocates, and policymakers joined Groundwork Ohio's Family Celebration. These other advocates had the opportunity to engage with local and state policymakers including President Pro Tempore of the Columbus City Council Liz Brown and Chief Health Opportunity Advisor for the Ohio Department of Health Jamie Carmichael.



The Statehouse was transformed in a way that we have never seen before with laughter, music, and dancing with some favorite characters: Baby JJ, Spiderman, Poppy, and Mickey Mouse!

And to close our celebration together, Representative Andrea White, Director Lydia Mihalik, and Commissioner Erica C. Crawley joined the fun to recognize the importance of family voice and to thank all families in attendance.





# The Little Things Are the Big Things

In doing this critical work of including and elevating family voices, the magic is in the details. Transforming a world, and the Ohio Statehouse building on May 18th, which primarily caters to adults to be an inviting place for families with young children is no small feat. These little things complement and are consistent with the deep commitment to honoring parents for their time and expertise and overcoming financial barriers to participation in the Network.



Transforming the State Room into a diaper changing and nursing station, providing diapers, wipes, and formula.



Providing Ohio Governor's Imagination Library books and play materials for young children on the table.



Setting up a quiet space for children to take a break from the formal agenda.

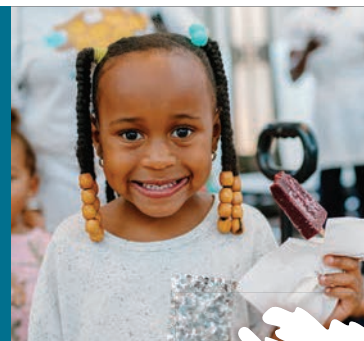


Making space for stroller parking.

Kid-friendly snacks and lunches (sun butter and jelly sandwiches were enjoyed by toddlers and policymakers alike!)



Engaging Black-owned family businesses to support the event.



Our Families

Our Stories

Our Statehouse



# What Questions Do Families Have of Policymakers?

During the workshops, families identified questions, prepared to share their stories, and thought through the conversations they wanted to have with their state policymakers. These questions demonstrated courage, curiosity, and a desire for accountability from the leaders elected to represent them. These families arrived at the Statehouse as advocates.



**Why do we have to continually fight for services that children need to thrive?**

*Is there a time as a caregiver that you felt like nobody was listening to you? What did you do about it if anything?*

*How can a single mother who makes 200% of the Federal Poverty Level afford to pay for child care?*

*Would you change your mind on an issue after speaking with constituents?*

*How can we provide more resources to communities further away from larger cities?*



**What keeps you up at night about your own young children?**

*How can solutions that families and family advocates have suggested be accelerated?*



## SECTION 5

# Perspective Is Cultivated

## Reflection on Principles & Best Practices



**“Gratitude is one of the most powerful human emotions. Once expressed, it changes attitude, brightens outlook, and broadens our perspective.”**

*~ Germany Kent*

# Feedback from Families

One of the ways we solicited feedback to better understand the experiences of the members of our Family Action Network (FAN) who attended the Launch Day on May 18th was through a survey. We have used the survey and family interviews to inform our actions and planning moving forward. We were grateful to be able to quantify and directly hear from families about how we can improve. Overall, the experiences were positive, but we have many opportunities to grow.

## After engaging with the Groundwork Ohio Family Action Network:



90%

of families **strongly agreed or agreed** that they are **confident** in their ability to be an **advocate** for their family and community.



79%

of families are interested in **building connections with policymakers.**



50+%

of families are interested in **training or activities** focused on advocacy and building connections **with local policymakers.**

**“I think talking and truly listening to individuals who were at the event will help strengthen FAN. Now that we have all done training and been there in person, we have a better understanding of what to expect if we get to do this again. Therefore, we can help strengthen and grow FAN together.”**  
~ *Family Ambassador*



## Reflections on the Family Action Network Launch

During the Launch day, and with the support of Design Impact, we continued to listen to our families and interviewed 18 family ambassadors to get their ideas on how to move the work forward as they were experiencing and engaging in the day. Their input is summarized in the following themes:

1

### BUILDING COMMUNITY & CONNECTIONS

Overall, families had a strong desire to stay connected and continue building a community. There was an interest in open and ad-hoc community building, as well as formal opportunities to connect with peers.

*"I really want to build a sense of community. People are not alone; I saw this in the workshops. I want people to see the value in the family to hear their stories regardless of where they are."*

2

### BRINGING FAMILIES TOGETHER TO SPEAK TO LEGISLATORS

Families were energized by the day of storytelling and loved being a part of a larger group action. There was a great deal of interest in future large power-building events. Families were interested in increasing the amount of time the legislators listen to them.

*"I want each family to have an opportunity to speak in front of policy makers. I want to be a part of it. I came in selfish with my own story and then I met others and realized I was a small part of a group and was not alone. I met people that help me think about new things. We need to be connected because it is the first step in change."*

*"I see more of bringing families together. The more legislators hear from families, the more they might put things into action. I want to see more families in the Statehouse. I'm interested in learning more about the fellowship."*





### 3 BELONGING & ADVOCACY ACROSS IDENTITY

Families shared an interest in developing communities dedicated to specific regions, family types, and issues. There was interest in putting specific effort into recruiting more families that represent the LGBTQ+ community.

*"Would like there to be specific groups to go deep with parents on topics such as learning disabilities and Lead. But want these to be non-exclusionary so that you can still talk with other parents."*

*"We need to make sure we are focused on the diversity of the community ambassadors. Do they really represent all communities? Do they represent single Black LGBT mothers like myself? I've struggled with laws around adoption and need to advocate for this."*

### 4 SUPPORTING LOCAL CONNECTIONS & ADVOCACY

Many families were active locally and were keenly interested in ways that Groundwork could support their local advocacy efforts. They saw an opportunity to develop an online platform to support connections and targeted training to bring people together and build the capability of the network to influence change.

*"I want voices to be heard and measures to be taken into the future. I want families to get the help they need. I want to make a change."*

*"Love to stay engaged, social media, word of mouth. More community events. Not on this scale, but need to do events in local smaller communities to help people. Be aware."*

*"Through more Zoom trainings and live events. Community events to keep active in the community."*



## Learning as We Grow

Groundwork Ohio is committed to an ongoing, iterative learning process as we engage in the work. We utilized a variety of evaluative tools to assess impact on families and identify where we can improve experiences among Family Action Network members. We continue to engage families to be responsive to each of their experiences with us to inform future programming.

# Power Is Abundantly Grown

As we approach this season of gratitude, there is no better time than the present to reflect on how far the Center for Family Voice has come, and what lies in store for us in 2023. This year began on a high note, with the inception of the Center for Family Voice and Family Action Network. We continue to be resolved that the best way to advocate for early childhood development is by amplifying the voice of families throughout the state of Ohio.

To our first family cohort, your voices have enriched our work and allowed us to share with policymakers the reality of what Ohio's families face daily. The unique struggles you contend with and the determination you have to set your children up for success inspires our work and will be a North Star for us in the coming year.

I consider myself fortunate to have arrived in the thick of discussions concerning this movement that will impact families across the state of Ohio, leveraging your voices to enhance advocacy efforts. The Center for Family Voice amplified the stories of Ohio families and introduced policymakers to those whom they are elected to represent. The launch of the Family Action Network provided information to families, empowering them to use their OUTSIDE voice on the state's biggest stage.

To connect families to each other, the Center for Family Voice launched two communication platforms in November that will provide families the opportunity to engage with one another and create a virtual village of support for families. The Center will also introduce a Podcast featuring the families in our Network. We want policymakers to hear their stories spoken in their voices.

At the beginning of 2023, the Center will also provide additional advocacy training to families in the Family Action Network in preparation for Advocacy Day on March 8, 2023. This training will increase the family's knowledge of the policymaking process and allow them to engage and collaborate with policymakers and other stakeholders throughout the state.

The future looks bright as we head into 2023. We will continue to expand and evolve into a space that allows families to connect, support, and empower each other while advancing equitable outcomes for young children. So, grab a seat - there is space for each of you at our growing table. Come gather with us in 2023!

*With gratitude,*



**Lawrence Witherspoon**  
Director, Center for Family Voice







*Gathered Around Our Table*  
Giving Thanks to Ohio Families



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4041 N. High Street, Suite 204 • Columbus, Ohio 43214