

2026 CANDIDATES BRIEFING GUIDE



**STRONGER COUNTIES.
STRONGER OHIO.**

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THE STATE-COUNTY PARTNERSHIP

Ohio's counties play a unique and indispensable role in the state's system of government.

Counties operate as political subdivisions of the state, with responsibilities and authorities established through statute. Counties administer many systems and services directed through state and federal law but often operate with more limited local flexibility and fewer independent revenue options than many Ohioans realize.

In practice, many of Ohio's most important public systems only function because counties implement them locally.

While the state establishes many laws, policies, and program requirements, counties are responsible for carrying out a wide range of services on behalf of Ohioans, including public safety, indigent defense, child welfare, public assistance eligibility, elections, workforce programs, jail operations, emergency communications systems, courts, and much more.

This structure allows services to be delivered locally by leaders who understand the needs of their communities while maintaining statewide standards and accountability. It also means that many state priorities ultimately depend on the strength, stability, and capacity of county government.

Ohio residents generally do not distinguish between state and local systems when they access public services. They simply expect government to work.

County leaders understand the importance of fiscal discipline, efficient government, and accountability to taxpayers. Counties recognize that government should continually evolve to meet changing needs and are committed to being constructive partners in identifying practical reforms that improve public services.

At the same time, counties must operate within statutory responsibilities and limited revenue authority. Successful policy reforms should therefore strengthen, not weaken, the state-county partnership by ensuring counties have the resources, flexibility, and tools necessary to continue delivering the essential services Ohioans depend upon.

The challenge ahead is not simply how to reduce costs, but how to ensure Ohio continues to meet its obligations to residents through a strong and workable partnership between state and county government.

As Ohio prepares for a new gubernatorial administration and the 137th General Assembly, counties look forward to working collaboratively with state leaders to strengthen that partnership, modernize systems where needed, and pursue practical solutions that support effective and responsive county government.

COUNTIES TODAY: STABLE, YET UNDER PRESSURE

County fiscal conditions vary considerably across Ohio. Many counties have benefited in recent years from a combination of economic growth, strong sales tax performance, and temporary federal relief funding associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those factors allowed many counties to make important investments in infrastructure, public facilities, technology, public safety, and service delivery. In some communities, stronger reserve balances have also created the perception that counties possess significant long-term excess capacity.

The reality is more complex. County leaders have a responsibility to plan beyond a single budget cycle and maintain long-term financial stability in systems responsible for public safety, courts, infrastructure, human services, and other essential operations. One-time funding and temporary revenue growth cannot responsibly be used to support permanent ongoing obligations without creating future structural challenges.

In many cases, county reserves reflect prudent long-term planning, including preparation for economic downturns, emergencies, major capital obligations, infrastructure expansion, and future public safety needs.

Simultaneously, counties are experiencing many of the same economic pressures affecting businesses, families, and state government. Inflation, rising construction costs, workforce shortages, healthcare costs, changes in federal policy and wage pressures have significantly increased the cost of delivering public services. For counties, many of these rising costs are tied to state-mandated responsibilities and essential services that cannot simply be reduced, delayed, or discontinued when costs increase.

Counties must balance their budgets every single year regardless of inflation, economic shifts, or changing state and federal policy.

Much of county government operates within funding structures that are restricted, voter-approved, or dedicated to specific purposes. Counties also have fewer revenue tools available than many people realize. Counties cannot levy an income tax and have only limited authority over sales taxes, making stable local revenue systems especially important to long-term planning and service delivery.

KEY PRIORITIES OF THE PARTNERSHIP

The following issues reflect some of the clearest examples of the state-county partnership in practice. In each of these areas, counties are responsible for administering, funding, supporting, or implementing services established or heavily directed by state and federal law. In many cases, counties are carrying out responsibilities Ohio residents understandably view as “state government” functions. The responsibilities do not pause when revenue becomes uncertain, inflation rises, or state and federal policy changes.

The following sections outline the county role, why the issue matters, where challenges have emerged, and opportunities to strengthen the state-county partnership moving forward.

Stable County Revenues

Stable and predictable revenue streams are essential to the ability of counties to provide critical public services, meet state-directed responsibilities, and plan for long-term needs. Because counties rely on a limited number of revenue sources, changes to any one of them can have significant consequences for county budgets and the services residents rely upon. A strong state-county fiscal partnership should preserve the stability of these core revenues while providing counties the flexibility and resources necessary to meet the needs of their communities.

Property Tax Reform

Property taxes are a foundational component of county finance and one of the most stable revenue sources available to local governments. For boards of county commissioners, property taxes provide significant support for the county general fund, while the stability of property tax revenues also helps counties issue bonds and finance major long-term capital investments. Property taxes also provide dedicated funding for critical services such as children services, developmental disabilities, senior services, mental health and addiction services, and public safety. Many of these services are supported through voter-approved levies, allowing local residents to determine the services they want to fund while reducing pressure on county general funds.

Counties recognize that rising property taxes are a significant concern for Ohio homeowners. CCAO supported a suite of reforms enacted by the 136th General Assembly that limited property tax spikes and provided over \$2 billion in property tax relief to taxpayers. Notably, CCAO supported legislation limiting future growth in inside millage revenue to the rate of inflation. Although this change will reduce the rate of future revenue growth for counties, CCAO supported the reform because it struck the right balance of providing meaningful taxpayer protections while allowing counties to continue meeting their essential responsibilities.

Counties remain committed to working with state leaders to identify additional, responsible property tax reforms. This includes targeted approaches such as expanding the state homestead exemption and creating new relief programs, including deferrals and circuit breakers that direct relief to homeowners most in need. Any additional reforms should be designed so they do not undermine the fiscal stability of county government or reduce the resources needed to provide the essential services like public safety, justice, and child protection.

Proposals to substantially reduce property taxes should carefully consider the broader implications for local government finance and the services and infrastructure Ohioans rely upon. Because property taxes provide

a stable revenue source, support voter-approved services, and help counties secure bond financing for major capital investments, significant reductions could have consequences extending well beyond county operating budgets. Any substantial reduction should therefore be accompanied by a sustainable and predictable replacement that preserves counties' ability to provide essential services, maintain fiscal stability, and finance long-term infrastructure needs.

Finally, the state can promote property tax relief by reducing the need for counties to levy property taxes in the first place. Over time, Ohio's property tax burden has gradually shifted toward residential and agricultural property owners, placing greater pressure on homeowners and reinforcing the need to address the underlying costs that drive local property taxes. By reducing state mandates, adequately funding state-required services, and ensuring counties have the flexibility to deliver services as effectively and cost-efficiently as possible, the state can help reduce the need for additional levies.

CCAO recommends that the state:

- Consider targeted, state-funded property tax relief by expanding tools such as the homestead exemption and considering circuit breakers or deferral programs that focus relief on homeowners most affected by rising property taxes.
- Avoid property tax reforms that undermine the revenue counties need to provide essential public safety, justice, child protection, and more.
- Reduce unfunded mandates and other state-imposed cost pressures that increase county expenses and contribute to the need for additional local property tax levies.

Maintain a Stable and Sustainable Sales Tax Base

County permissive sales taxes are the primary revenue source supporting county general operations and essential services. Because counties have limited revenue flexibility, maintaining a stable and sustainable sales tax base is critical to funding public safety, courts, infrastructure, elections, and other state-directed responsibilities administered at the county level.

Over many years, the sales tax base narrowed as new exemptions were enacted, and certain local revenue streams, including the sales tax on Medicaid managed care organizations, were eliminated. Collectively, these policy changes significantly impacted revenue growth for counties.

The 136th General Assembly began to reverse that trend by closing several sales tax exemptions in the most recent operating budget. Counties welcomed these changes, and they continue to support thoughtful efforts to broaden the sales tax base to improve long-term revenue stability.

Counties recognize that many tax policy decisions are adopted for legitimate economic or public policy reasons. At the same time, changes to the sales tax base can have meaningful downstream impacts on county finances and the ability to fund essential local services. As future tax policy is considered, counties urge policymakers to protect the sales tax base and avoid exemptions or other changes that would erode this critical source of county revenue.

CCAO recommends that the state:

- Maintain a broad and stable sales tax base that minimizes carveouts.

- Review existing sales tax exemptions and repeal those that no longer provide sufficient economic or public policy benefit.
- Recognize the relationship between local revenue stability and counties' ability to implement shared public responsibilities.

Local Government Fund

The Local Government Fund (LGF) has long served as an important component of the fiscal partnership between the state and local governments. While the fund remains an important source of flexible revenue for counties, its role has evolved substantially over the past 15 years. Historically, the LGF received 3.68 percent of the state's General Revenue Fund, but today it receives 1.75 percent. Although LGF distributions have grown in recent years as the state General Revenue Fund has expanded, the LGF represents a much smaller share of state revenues than it once did. Preserving and strengthening the state's investment in the LGF remains an important component of maintaining a strong state-county partnership.

Over time, counties have adapted to this new fiscal environment by relying more heavily on locally generated revenue sources, particularly property taxes and local sales taxes, to fund core public services and fulfill state-directed responsibilities. As a result, decisions affecting these revenue sources now have an even greater impact on county finances than they did when the LGF represented a larger share of county budgets.

This evolution underscores the importance of maintaining stable and predictable local revenue systems. As policymakers consider changes to Ohio's tax structure, counties encourage a comprehensive approach that recognizes how state revenue sharing, property taxes, and local sales taxes work together to support essential public services across Ohio's counties. If state policy changes significantly reduce existing county revenues, the LGF and other state-county revenue sharing mechanisms can also provide tools to help preserve the fiscal capacity of counties to continue providing these services.

Addressing Growing County Cost Pressures

Counties are facing significant and growing costs associated with administering state and federal programs at the local level. Nowhere is this pressure more evident than in child protection, where rapidly escalating placement and service costs are placing substantial strain on county budgets and local property taxpayers. At the same time, changes to federal SNAP funding will shift millions of dollars in additional administrative costs and create broader financial and operational risks. As these pressures grow, the state and counties will need to work together in addressing these escalating responsibilities and costs, while recognizing growing pressure on property tax levies.

Strengthen Ohio's Child Welfare System

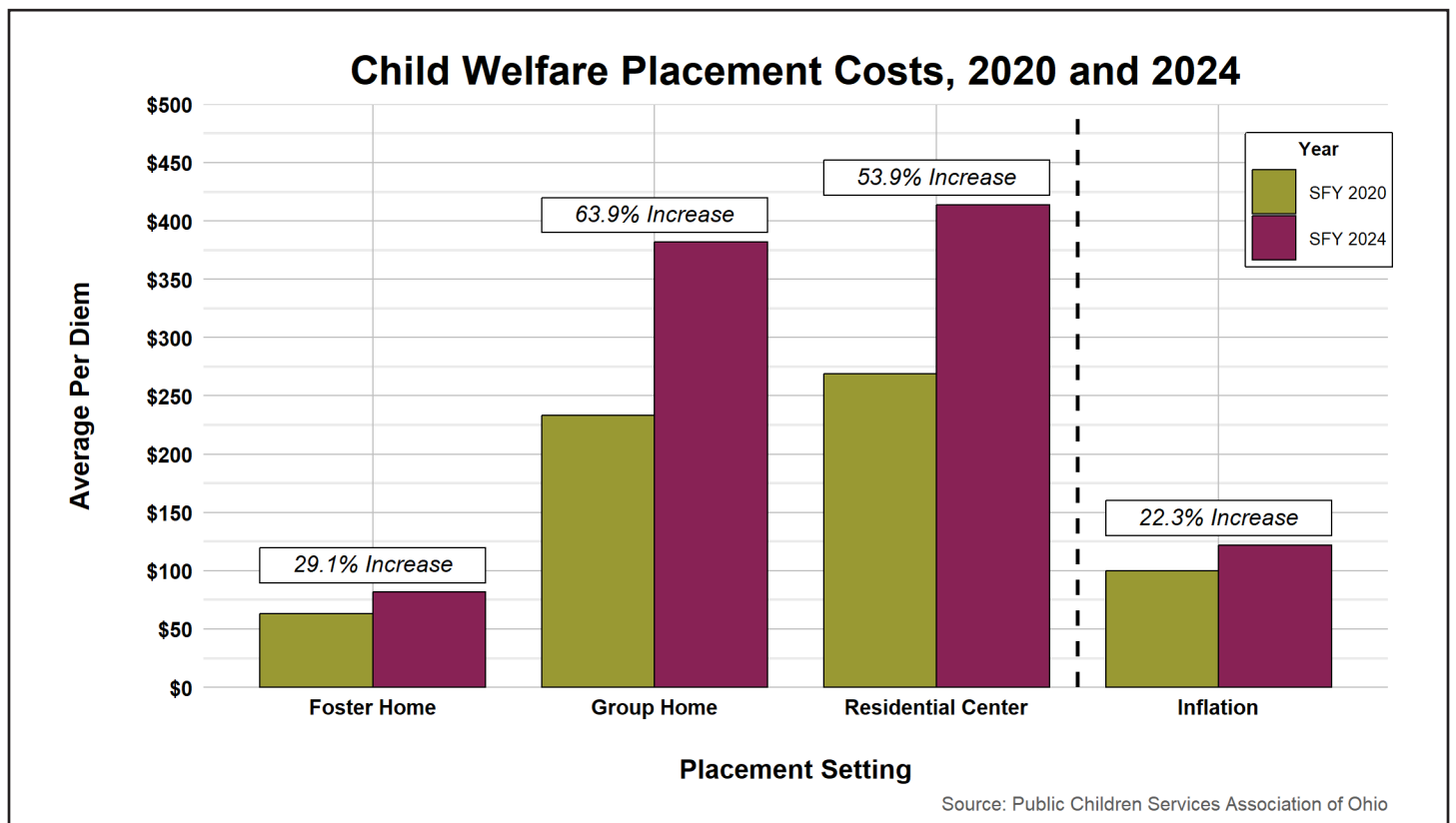
Ohio's child welfare system is state-supervised and county-administered, with county public children services agencies responsible for protecting children and supporting vulnerable families in every county.

In recent years, counties have faced growing challenges as the needs of children entering the system have become increasingly complex while placement costs have risen dramatically.

Although the number of children in custody declined by 9% between 2020 and 2024, overall costs increased by 68%, significantly outpacing inflation which was 22.3%. Cost increases are driven in part by inflation, yet

also by changes in the population of children entering county custody. Increasingly, counties are serving children with significant behavioral health needs, developmental disabilities, or youth diverted from the juvenile justice system rather than children entering care solely because of abuse or neglect. These children often require more intensive services and present more complex and challenging needs, increasing the cost of care. For some of the highest-need youth, specialized placements can cost counties amounts exceeding \$1,000 per day, illustrating the significant financial pressures these cases can place on local children services systems.

Securing timely, appropriate, and affordable placements often proves challenging, causing a public children services agency (PCSA) to place children out of county or even out of state. Counties continue to struggle with workforce shortages, limited treatment capacity, and escalating placement costs. Placement costs are unpredictable, making it difficult for counties to budget for them.



While the state has significantly increased funding for child protection through the State Child Protection Allocation (SCPA) in recent operating budgets, Ohio continues to rely more heavily on local resources to fund its child welfare system than most other states. Counties finance a substantial share of these costs through county general funds and locally approved property tax levies, with 52 counties currently relying on dedicated levies to support children services. At the same time, declining federal Title IV-E reimbursement has shifted an even greater share of placement costs to counties.

This funding structure means that rapidly rising placement and service costs have implications beyond county children services agencies; they also place additional pressure on county budgets and local property taxpayers. As counties are required to meet the needs of children in their custody, they have limited ability to avoid these costs when placement rates increase. Greater state investment in child protection can, therefore, help reduce pressure on county general funds and locally approved property tax levies, supporting the shared

goal of protecting vulnerable children while limiting additional pressure on Ohio property taxpayers.

Finally, the state has taken steps to improve system transparency through the development of provider rate cards and has invested in initiatives such as regional child wellness campuses to provide short-term crisis stabilization. Counties appreciate these efforts and support continued collaboration to expand service capacity and stabilize placement capacity and costs.

CCAO recommends that the state:

- Increase state investment in the State Child Protection Allocation.
- Expand in-state placement capacity and strengthen prevention-focused services.
- Support recruitment and retention of foster families, kinship caregivers, and child welfare professionals.
- Continue improving transparency and consistency in provider rates.

SNAP Administration and the State-County Partnership

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a federal food assistance program for eligible low-income individuals and families. In Ohio, more than half of SNAP recipients are children or elderly, reflecting the important role the program plays in providing food assistance to households that include some of the state's most vulnerable residents. SNAP is administered through a state-supervised, county-administered system, with county departments of job and family services responsible for determining eligibility for residents in their county. This structure makes adequate state and federal administrative funding critical to counties' ability to operate the program effectively.

Beginning October 1, 2026, the federal match for SNAP administrative costs will decrease from 50% to 25%. In Ohio, existing state law provides that the remaining non-federal share is split between the state and counties, with counties responsible for approximately 48% of the non-federal cost. These changes are projected to increase county administrative costs by approximately \$51 million annually. CCAO appreciates the General Assembly's investment of \$12.5 million in State Fiscal Year 2027 to help offset a portion of these increased administrative costs. While this funding does not fully address the additional costs some counties will incur, it represents an important step in helping counties adapt to the new federal funding structure.

Counties look forward to working with the next Administration and General Assembly to address how the federal cost shift will be addressed in the next state operating budget bill. Reduced administrative funding could make it harder for counties to recruit and retain eligibility workers, leaving existing staff with heavier caseloads and less capacity to administer an increasingly complex program. CCAO also supports continued investment in Ohio Benefits, the state's IT eligibility determination system. Modernizing the system will take time, and these improvements are critical to ensuring county job and family services agencies have the tools they need to administer SNAP accurately, efficiently, and in compliance with increasingly complex federal requirements.

In addition, beginning October 1, 2027, states will be required to share in the cost of SNAP benefits based on their program error rate. Currently, the federal government fully funds SNAP benefits. Under the new structure, a state's financial obligation will be determined by its SNAP payment error rate—the percentage of cases in which benefits are calculated incorrectly, either through overpayments or underpayments, based on a federally required random sample of cases. In federal fiscal year 2024, SNAP benefits in Ohio totaled approximately \$3.2 billion.

Ohio has made meaningful progress in reducing its SNAP payment error rate, which now stands at 6.76 percent compared to the national average of 10.62 percent. While this improvement is encouraging, additional work remains. Continued partnership between the state and counties, including investments in county operations and the Ohio Benefits eligibility system, will be essential to further improving accuracy and avoiding costly federal penalties under the new federal cost-sharing requirements.

Federal/State Split of SNAP Benefit Costs Based on Error Rate			
State Error Rate	Federal Share of Benefit Costs	State Share of Benefit Costs	Estimated Annual Ohio Cost
Less than 6%	100%	0%	\$0
6.0% to 7.9%	95%	5%	\$160 million
8.0% to 9.9%	90%	10%	\$320 million
Greater than 10%	85%	15%	\$480 million

Supporting County Justice and Public Safety Systems

Counties are responsible for much of the infrastructure and day-to-day administration of Ohio's local justice and public safety systems. These responsibilities carry significant and growing costs, from providing constitutionally required indigent defense to operating and maintaining county jails that increasingly serve individuals with complex medical, mental health, and addiction needs. Continued state investment is critical to helping counties meet these responsibilities, modernize aging systems and facilities, and ensure that growing costs do not fall disproportionately on county budgets and local taxpayers.

Fully Fund and Modernize the Indigent Defense System

Providing legal representation to individuals who cannot afford counsel is a constitutional obligation of the state. In Ohio, counties administer much of this system at the local level by securing and compensating counsel for indigent defendants. The state then reimburses counties for a portion of those costs, making the reimbursement rate a critical component in fulfilling this constitutional responsibility.

For years, counties absorbed a substantial share of indigent defense costs as state reimbursement levels failed to keep pace with actual expenses. State reimbursement rarely reached even 50% of county costs and fell to a low of just 26.1% in FY 2009, leaving counties statewide to absorb tens of millions of dollars annually in costs associated with fulfilling the state's constitutional responsibility.

The state has made important and much appreciated progress in recent biennia to strengthen this partnership. Increased investments have significantly improved reimbursement rates, reaching as high as 100% in FY 2022 and averaging approximately 80% in recent years. Counties greatly appreciate these investments and view them as significant progress toward ensuring the state more fully meets its constitutional responsibility to fund indigent defense.

At the same time, structural challenges remain, particularly in rural areas where attorney shortages have made it increasingly difficult for counties to maintain local indigent defense systems. The 136th General Assembly took an important step toward addressing these challenges by establishing the Northwest Regional Indigent Defense Hub, a state-run regional office designed to provide indigent defense services across multiple counties. The hub represents an important modernization effort and may serve as a model for future expansion into additional counties that wish to participate.

CCAO recommends that the state:

- Continue modernizing the system through expansion of regional, state-administered indigent defense hubs.
- Ensure counties not participating in a state-administered hub receive sufficient funding to fully cover indigent defense costs.
- Support recruitment and retention strategies for qualified defense counsel, particularly in underserved areas.

County Jails, Public Safety, and Behavioral Health

County government plays a central role in supporting Ohio's public safety infrastructure, including sheriffs' offices, jails, courts, emergency communications systems, emergency management operations, and related justice system functions.

Increasingly, county jails have also become one of the primary places where communities confront unmet mental health and addiction needs.

Changes in sentencing policy, workforce shortages in behavioral health care, and broader gaps in Ohio's treatment system have significantly increased the complexity of county jail populations. Many counties are now housing individuals with acute mental illness, substance use disorders, and serious medical needs in facilities that were never designed for that purpose.

Compounding these challenges, county jails across Ohio were often constructed decades ago and lack the space necessary to safely support treatment services, medical observation, crisis intervention, and appropriate separation of vulnerable populations.

A 2024 joint survey conducted by CCAO and the Buckeye State Sheriffs' Association identified more than \$2.2 billion in county jail construction and renovation needs statewide, up from approximately \$1.3 billion only a few years earlier. Counties also continue to face rapidly rising construction and operational costs driven by inflation and workforce pressures.

The state has renewed important investments in county jail infrastructure in recent years through multiple state capital and operating budgets, and counties greatly appreciate that partnership. However, the scale of need continues to far exceed available resources.

Beyond the significant capital needs facing county jails, the cost of providing necessary medical and behavioral health care to incarcerated individuals represents another substantial expense for counties.

CCAO supported language enacted in the state operating budget directing the Ohio Department of Medicaid to seek federal approval of a Section 1115 demonstration waiver that would allow Medicaid coverage of certain mental health and substance use disorder treatments for eligible individuals prior to their release from jail. The waiver also contemplates continuity of care upon release, including access to necessary prescription medications. While federal approval of the waiver is uncertain, counties recognize its potential to help offset county healthcare costs while improving continuity of care and better positioning individuals for successful reentry into their communities.

Strong county public safety systems are essential not only to community safety, but also to Ohio's long-term economic competitiveness and quality of life.

CCAO recommends that the state:

- Continue the state-county partnership supporting county jail construction and renovation.
- Establish a dedicated and sustainable funding stream for county jail infrastructure.
- Support facilities and programming designed to address mental health, addiction, and treatment needs within county correctional systems.
- Support Ohio's efforts to secure federal approval of the Section 1115 waiver to reduce county healthcare costs and improve continuity of care.

Modernizing County Government

Counties support efforts to modernize government, improve efficiency, and ensure public resources are used responsibly. Thoughtful reforms can strengthen public trust while preserving the state-local partnership necessary to deliver essential services.

As policymakers consider modernization efforts, it is important to recognize that counties often administer and fund responsibilities over which they have limited authority to establish rules, control costs, or manage operations.

Election Administration

Ohio's counties administer elections under state-established laws, procedures, and security standards. County boards of elections are responsible for ensuring elections are conducted accurately, securely, and efficiently, while county commissioners provide the local resources necessary to carry out those responsibilities.

Counties are proud of Ohio's strong election system and appreciate the state's past partnership in helping counties modernize voting equipment. State assistance with these significant capital costs has been particularly valuable and demonstrates the importance of a shared state-county approach to funding election infrastructure.

CCAO recommends that the state:

- Continue state-county partnerships supporting voting machine and electronic pollbook replacement.
- Engage counties early in discussions regarding the fiscal and operational impact of proposed election policy changes.
- Explore opportunities for the state to assume a greater share of election administration costs.

Modernize Funding Obligations Tied to County Inside Mills of Property Tax

The 136th General Assembly has taken steps to limit spikes in county property tax revenue generated through inside millage. At the same time, Ohio law continues to tie certain county funding obligations to property tax values, including funding for Veterans Service Commissions and the state-administered Program for Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs.

These programs provide important services and should continue to be adequately funded. However, as the state reexamines the relationship between property values and county revenues, it should also revisit statutory funding obligations tied to inside millage,

CCAO recommends that the state:

- Revisit statutory funding obligations tied to inside millage to establish more predictable and sustainable funding structures for these important services.

Tuberculosis Treatment

Under current law, counties remain the payor of last resort for costs associated with tuberculosis (TB) treatment and quarantine. These cases can be unpredictable and extremely costly.

This funding requirement goes way back to when there were TB hospitals and an earlier era of public health administration when counties played a central role in tuberculosis response. Today, the local governments tasked with local health programs are municipalities and townships through local health departments. Thus, this should either be repealed or transferred to the state.

CCAO recommends that the state:

- Re-assign who is the payor of last resort for tuberculosis treatment and quarantine costs.

Laying the Foundation for Economic Growth

Counties play an important role in creating the conditions necessary for economic growth, including investing in infrastructure, preparing sites for development, supporting housing opportunities, and addressing barriers to workforce participation. Continued state-county partnerships in these areas can help counties attract investment, support employers, and accommodate growth.

CCAO recommends that the state:

- **Continue investing in the roads, bridges, water, sewer, broadband, and other infrastructure necessary to support economic and residential development.** Infrastructure costs can make otherwise viable projects difficult to advance, particularly in smaller and rural communities. Flexible state programs can help counties address these barriers and prepare communities for future growth.
- **Support programs and financing tools that help communities expand housing supply and overcome barriers to residential development.** A shortage of available housing can make it difficult for employers to attract and retain workers and can constrain growth in communities across Ohio. Counties can help facilitate development through infrastructure investments, land banks, planning, redevelopment efforts, and partnerships with local governments and the private sector.
- **Improve access to affordable, reliable childcare as an important component of Ohio's workforce strategy.** A lack of available childcare can prevent parents from entering or remaining in the workforce and creates challenges for employers seeking workers. State policies should encourage additional childcare capacity while recognizing the different challenges facing urban, suburban, and rural communities.
- **Continue state investment in brownfield remediation and redevelopment.** Contaminated and underutilized properties can impede economic development, depress surrounding property values, and leave communities with sites that are difficult to return to productive use. State brownfield programs have provided counties and local partners with important resources to clean up these properties and position them for redevelopment

CONCLUSION

Ohio's counties stand at the intersection of numerous public policy priorities facing the state. Whether supporting public safety, administering human services, conducting elections, maintaining critical infrastructure, strengthening Ohio's workforce, or fostering economic development, counties serve as the local implementation partner for many of the state's most important responsibilities.

Throughout this guide, one theme remains consistent: effective public policy depends not only on sound ideas, but on practical implementation. Counties are committed to responsible budgeting, efficient government, taxpayer accountability, and continuous improvement. They also recognize that successful implementation requires responsibilities, authority, and funding structures that remain aligned over time.

As Ohio prepares for a new gubernatorial administration and the 137th General Assembly, counties look forward to working with state leaders to modernize government, strengthen fiscal sustainability, improve public services, and support continued economic growth. Counties are not seeking to preserve the status quo. Rather, they seek a state-county partnership that reflects today's fiscal realities, evolving workforce needs, and growing service demands while providing local leaders with the tools necessary to deliver results.

Ohio's continued success will depend upon strong collaboration between state and local government. By working together to align responsibilities, funding, and accountability, Ohio can continue building safe communities, expanding economic opportunity, and delivering the high-quality public services its residents expect for generations to come.

APPENDICES

CCAO Leadership

2026 Executive Committee

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1st Vice President – Casey Kozlowski, Ashtabula County Commissioner
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Member – Glenn Miller, Henry County Commissioner
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