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FY2025 Budget Statement – November 14, 2023

Good afternoon Director Cade and Office of Management and Budget Representatives:

My name is Pam Weir, and I am the Executive Director of the Governor's Advisory Council for Exceptional Citizens, also known as the GACEC. Our Council Chair, Ann Fisher, sends her regrets that she is unable to join us.

The building that houses the GACEC, Massey Station, continues to receive needed maintenance. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Division of Facilities Management (DFM) teams have been an amazingly diligent, hard-working group. We are very grateful for their attention to preserving the history of the building and maintaining a safe and pleasant work environment for Massey Station occupants.

The technology needed to support the work of the GACEC has been updated and enhanced. The Department of Technology and Information (DTI) continues to diligently support GACEC staff and Council with all requests needed to adapt to the ever-changing needs of persons with disabilities and exceptionalities. We are very grateful for the support of OMB and DTI for their investment in this community.

Last year's GACEC budget included the funding for a new casual/seasonal position. I am happy to report that we have been able to hire a new staff person. We are actively working to train and support her. This vital addition to staff will help us support Delaware's most vulnerable populations. We are very grateful to OMB for funding this position.

The GACEC has been in existence since 1972. We serve as the State Advisory Panel for the State of Delaware under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In that role, we monitor services and make recommendations on behalf of students with exceptionalities to the Governor, General Assembly, Secretary of Education, and the State Board of Education. In 1977, the State of Delaware enhanced the role of the GACEC to include advising and advocating on the unmet service needs of all citizens with exceptionalities from birth to death. That change expanded our role to provide advice and information to other agencies such as the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), the Department of Transportation (DeIDOT), the

Department of Services for Children, Youth and their Families (DSCYF), the Delaware State Housing Authority (DSHA) and other advocacy organizations across the state. Since the passage of Senate Bill 20 in 2014, the Council is also mandated to meet annually with representatives of the Delaware Department of Education (DOE) and the Department of Corrections (DOC) to discuss the operation of the joint prison education program.

This past year, the GACEC worked on several key pieces of legislation including 22 bills and 31 regulations. Several were passed and signed this past legislative session. I would like to highlight a few that impact individuals with disabilities and children qualifying for special education services.

House Substitute 1 for House Bill No. 33, Funding for Pre-Kindergarten Special Education. The GACEC supported this legislation that will increase funding for preschool children with disabilities who are not counted in “intensive” or “complex” by revising student ratios. The Act also consolidates the K-3 Basic Special Education Unit with the 4-12 Basic Special Education Unit, as the ratio is the same for each group. The bill differs from the original House Bill No. 33 in that it omits the Preschool 2 Basic Special Education Unit. HS1 for HB 33 was signed by the Governor on June 22, 2023.

Senate Bill No. 32 with Senate Amendment 1, Eligibility for 12 Month School Year. Council endorsed the proposed bill which adds “visual impairments including blindness” to the list of disabilities that qualify children for a 12-month school year and recommended an amendment to make the statutory language listing eligible students consistent with federal law and state practice. The amendment also limits the number of teacher workdays for teachers with the Division for the Visually Impaired to not more than 226 days. SB32 with SA1 was signed by the Governor on August 3, 2023.

House Bill No. 114, Certification of Recovery Houses. Council supported the concept of this proposal to require certification for Recovery Houses in Delaware that wish to receive referrals from state agencies and who receive state funds. Council supported the concept of regulating recovery houses but asked that the sponsors of the legislation address protection of all residents in these settings. Council also requested information on why Oxford Houses are exempt from the proposed certification requirement. Council’s questioned were addressed in HS 1 for HB 114 w/SA 1, which was signed by the Governor on August 1, 2023

The GACEC performance measures are different from other agencies because we do not provide direct client services. In response to our first performance measure, Council sent out over 1350 letters to the General Assembly, the Department of Education, DHSS, and other agencies in this past year. Through our correspondence, the GACEC assists these agencies with their understanding of the implications of regulatory and legislative changes on the lives of individuals with disabilities.

Council members and staff are fully committed to improving the lives of Delawareans with exceptionalities through collaboration with other stakeholders. The Council and staff are

honored to work with our Governor, Lieutenant Governor, legislators, cabinet secretaries, state agencies and nonprofit organizations. To address our second performance measure, Council members and staff participate on over 68 advisory boards, committees, or taskforces including the Center for Disabilities Studies Community Advisory Council, the LIFE Conference Planning Committee, the State Council for Persons with Disabilities and other stakeholder groups formed by the Department of Education or General Assembly.

Council continues to educate the public and the disability community on disability issues and services related to children, youth and adults through various presentations, workshops, newsletters, and conferences. Council advises and provides recommendations to agency heads and legislators for systemic change activities. Through our efforts, individuals with disabilities and their families are given the opportunity to provide input into the design and provision of needed community services.

Our third performance measure tracks individuals contacted via outreach and awareness activities. The GACEC provided information to the public utilizing hybrid, in-person, and virtual formats due to the needs of members, constituents, and stakeholders since the pandemic. Council has been able to connect with over 1,500 individuals through various online and in-person conferences and workshops on issues relevant to the disability community. This year, the GACEC has participated in several outreach events and has many more on the calendar for the coming months. The GACEC is working collaboratively with the Parent Information Center of Delaware (PIC) to provide trainings and in-person mentorship opportunities to enhance family training and advocacy. Additionally, I am pleased to report that the GACEC has entered into an agreement with the YMCA of Delaware to convene several statewide events for next year's Disability History and Awareness month.

In 2021, we finalized the newest upgrades to the Delaware Disability Hub (DelDHub) transition website and are continuing to make the GACEC website more ADA accessible. The DelDHub received over 17,597 hits with over 13,124 unique visitors from September 2022 through September 2023- up from last year's totals of 15,247 hits from September 2021 through September 2022, with over 12,656 unique visitors. We are pleased to see our marketing efforts are paying off and have ambitious plans for the coming year including the formation of a DelDHub Advisory Committee. This incredible website provides information and resources for transitioning youth, their families, and educators around the State.

Navigating this post-Covid world is a challenge for all of us. Our community has seen a lot of change as cherished staff and friends across this field have retired after many years of invaluable service or decided to exit for other reasons. While these losses have created a great void, they have also ushered in new faces and future allies. This time of change provides great opportunity. While the GACEC is a small agency with a small budget, we always try to do our part and be mindful of times of crisis. Our Governor-appointed volunteers and staff will continue to do our best with the resources we are provided to monitor and provide advice and advocacy on behalf of individuals with exceptionalities. We need to continue our investment in

our children, and we particularly know how important it is to invest in our children with disabilities.

Our only request for this fiscal year is the 19.7 that is our allotment of the FY2024 contingency funds for increases in personnel cost as directed by OMB. We are in the process of researching costs for a project that we hope to bring to your attention next year and will request additional funding for that activity at that time. In the meantime, we will continue to work towards fulfilling our mission and using the funds we are given as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share our budgetary information with you. I wish you well.

Be safe and stay healthy.

Pam Weir

Executive Director

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