A Transition Year for Ohio—and Why It Matters Who Stays Connected

By Mark Mecum, CEO, Ohio Children's Alliance

In nine months, Ohio will swear in a new Governor. Whoever takes office will do so without having previously held elected office, stepping into a role that directly shapes how decisions which are affecting children, families, and communities are made. For anyone who cares about how Ohio approaches these issues, that transition alone makes 2026 a year worth watching closely.

This is also the final year of Governor Mike DeWine's 8-year administration. Across state agencies, there is a visible effort to bring long-running initiatives to a point of resolution and to finalize work that has been under development for years. End-of-term compression like this is familiar in government, but its effect depends heavily on what comes next and how much continuity exists through change. Governor DeWine has been widely recognized for giving sustained attention to issues impacting kids and families, including behavioral health, child protection, and family stability. That level of focus from a governor is uncommon nationally, and it should not be assumed that it automatically carries forward with new leadership. Whether and how that emphasis continues will depend on early priorities, staffing decisions, and how well context carries through the transition.

Those choices will be made within an enormous fiscal frame. The State Fiscal Year 2028–2029 operating budget is projected to exceed $120 billion, with a significant share supporting health care, behavioral health, child welfare, and family-focused services. Medicaid alone serves nearly three million Ohioans, including more than one million children. Decisions made over the next year will shape service access, workforce stability, and capacity across communities statewide. As the DeWine administration enters its final year, there is a noticeable push to finish and formalize child welfare and behavioral health finance policies, including the DCY Rate Card and ODM Utilization Management initiatives, as well as the ODM Multi-System Youth program. All of these changes, once adopted, would influence how services operate long after this administration concludes.

At the same time, the broader policy environment has grown less settled. Proposals have emerged in the legislature that would revisit long-standing structures, including calls to dismantle Ohio's Medicaid managed care model and proposals to eliminate the property tax, a major source of local revenue supporting health and human services. Whether these ideas advance or fail, their presence alone signals how much may be reopened as our government shifts to new leadership.

Many leaders across Ohio are already preparing for change. Providers, advocates, funders, and community partners are engaging with gubernatorial campaign teams connected to Dr. Amy Acton and Vivek Ramaswamy as those campaigns begin outlining policy approaches. These conversations can help shape how issues are understood before formal decisions take hold.

Ohio's approach to supporting kids and families is the product of two centuries of iteration and adjustment across government, faith institutions, providers, and communities. That context does not

automatically transfer with a change in leadership. New policymakers will step into roles that require quick judgment, broad oversight, and prompt decision-making.

In moments like this, it's important for advocates to stay connected to a clear, grounded view of what's happening. Progress is easier to carry forward when it is understood, and easier to lose when it is not.

The Ohio Children's Alliance will continue to make space for education, dialogue, and connection between policymakers and those working closest to kids and families. During moments of transition, we can foster success if information moves freely and relationships stay active. We will do our part and we actively welcome each of you to reach out and find new ways to collaborate to make an impact.