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FY2024 Budget Statement – November 15, 2022

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. Here with me today is our Office Manager Kathie Cherry. 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 air conditioning units have been replaced, the columns and wood facades have been stripped and repainted and installation of the new roof is in the final phase of completion as we meet. 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 security system installation for Massey Station has been completed. OMB/DFM, the Delaware Department of Technology and Information (DTI) and Advantech worked collaboratively to ensure the installation was completed and all moving parts work collaboratively. This has been a long, tedious process and we are very thankful for this group of individuals and their attention to detail.

The technology needed to support the work of the GACEC has been updated and enhanced. DTI installed Wi-Fi for staff and guests, provided additional equipment for staff to work more efficiently, supported a building-wide broadband upgrade and organized the rewiring necessary to support all new technology. The GACEC received American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding for new audio-visual equipment in the conference room that will allow for Council members to meet remotely and in-person more efficiently. Installation for this system was completed in October, just in time for our Annual GACEC Retreat. Funding was authorized for a Microsoft Teams software package for Council members, and we are working with DTI to assist with logins where needed. Access to Teams will provide Council members and staff a space to work collaboratively on documents, convene virtual meetings and house documents and materials

including professional development resources. We are very grateful for the support of OMB and their investment in persons with disabilities and exceptionalities.

This year's GACEC budget includes the funding for a new casual/seasonal position. We are currently drafting the posting and hope to have a new staffer by the New Year. We are very grateful to OMB for funding this position as it will assist us in providing the ongoing support necessary to ensure that Council can adapt to the ever-changing needs of persons with disabilities and exceptionalities.

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 prison education program.

This past year, the GACEC worked on several key pieces of legislation including 17 bills and 25 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 Bill No. 300 Middle School Mental Health Services was the first of several bills impacting mental health services, especially in schools. House Bill No. 300 proposed the creation of mental health services units for school districts and charter schools serving students in middle school, grades 6-8. The bill would also provide increasing funding for social workers or counselors each year from 2023 to 2025. Council supported the bill but recommended the legislation be amended to provide more funding based on demonstrated need above the ratios established in the bill. As written, if a school district or charter has greater need for mental health supports than the required ratios in this bill and is already funding mental health support at these ratios, that school district or charter school would not benefit from this funding. The bill was signed by the Governor on August 3, 2022.

House Bill No. 301 Statewide School Mental Health Education Programs requires "The Department of Education [to] establish and implement statewide mental health educational programs for each grade [K-12] in each school district and charter school in this State." Council applauded the motivation behind this legislation but shared concerns that the educational

programming could end up being stigmatizing if not structured appropriately. For example, many people equate disabilities with illness/absence of health. Speaking of “physical health” may be misconstrued to mean absence of disability. Council also recommended legislative language be added to specify that the educational programming must be research-based and evidence-based. This bill was also signed by the Governor on August 3, 2022.

House Bill No. 454 Special Education and Related Services Eligibility amends Chapter 31 of Title 14 to bring Delaware in compliance with its duties under the IDEA. It ensures students with disabilities eligible for special education and related services are provided a free appropriate public education until August 31 after the school year in which the student turns 22. Council supported the legislation and offered one recommendation to make a slight change to 14 Del. C. §3101(6), which is the definition for students identified as gifted and talented. These students, under HB 454, would still have eligibility end on August 31 after the school year in which they turn 21. This should be changed to 22 to ensure Delaware State law is fully consistent and compliant with the IDEA, which is federal law. Council also encouraged legislators to push the bill through the Legislature as quickly as possible to ensure its passage prior to the end of this legislative session. This would ensure that students who would otherwise lose eligibility for special education and related services on August 31, 2022, would be able to remain in school and receive their much-needed services for an additional year. This bill was signed by the Governor on July 22, 2022.

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 1300 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 60 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 was unable to provide as much information to the public due to the cancellation of various in-person conferences and workshops around the State. However, Council was able to provide a limited amount of information to over 1270 individuals utilizing virtual formats.

Last year, we finalized the newest upgrades to the Delaware Disability Hub (DeIDHub) transition website and are continuing to make the GACEC website more ADA accessible. The DeIDHub received over 15,247 hits with over 12,656 unique visitors from September 2021 through September 2022- up from last year's totals of 12,698 hits from September 2020 through September 2021, with over 6,833 unique visitors. 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. We want our children to be happy, healthy, successful individuals in their communities and that starts right here right now. 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  
Governor's Advisory Council for Exceptional Citizens (GACEC)