

Chairs Nosse and Beyer, members of the committee,

My name is Alice Pangburn, I am an SEIU 503 member and a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. I have worked for VR in the South Salem VR office for 15 years serving Oregonians with disabilities gain employment, accomplish self-sufficiency and independence. During my tenure Vocational Rehabilitation has experienced significant changes to the work we do, increasing our workload exponentially.

Our work was significantly impacted by WIOA—Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act passed by congress in 2014. This has increased our “paper” workload significantly—our timelines to service delivery were cut in half and the amount of paperwork to satisfy both federal and state requirements have increased drastically.

At the same time our agency has been inundated with more and more Oregonians with disabilities seeking services to assist them in preparing to enter or reenter the workforce. Typical caseload sizes in the Salem area run anywhere between 90 to 130 clients. With the implementation of Employment First, there was a major shift in VR’s focus toward serving the IDD/DD population. This population requires a large amount of partner meetings with other community agencies to ensure that their service needs are addressed. It often requires a longer amount of time to realize an employment outcome for our IDD/DD clients and so they may remain on our caseloads significantly longer as compared with other disability populations, thus contributing to the “ballooning” of our caseloads.

Counselors in our agency are passionate about serving Oregonians with disabilities and love to celebrate with clients their success in gaining employment. But they are also overwhelmed by the workload, and the consequences of understaffing has taken a toll on VR staff—mentally, physically—often leading to health issues, perhaps resulting in early retirement and staff turnover. We simply need more staff to do the good work of assisting Oregonians with disabilities gain and maintain employment, become self-sufficient and contribute to their local communities.

Funding VR so that more staff can be hired will increase our ability to provide a higher quality of services because we would be able to focus on each individual's employment needs versus rushing from one client to another and not being able to attend to all the important issues that may need to be addressed.

The work that my colleagues and I do is important to the people we serve, and it's a critical part of Oregon's social safety net. I am asking you to do everything you can to ensure that we are able to continue to provide these services, and not make any further cuts that increase our workloads and hurt our clients.

Thank you for your time, and for your commitment to this issue.

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