



Providing Supports. Empowering People
Celebrating Over 40 Years of Service to the People of Umatilla County

April 16, 2021

Dear Senators:

Since the late 1970s Horizon Project has provided residential, employment and community living supports for adults experiencing intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in Hermiston, Pendleton and Milton-Freewater. With over 200 employees supporting over 150 participants, Horizon Project is one of the larger employers in rural Umatilla County.

Providers of IDD services are first and foremost caretakers of some of the most forgotten and vulnerable in our society. We provide for meaningful, often invisible societal needs. Our Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) are essential health care workers who have shown up every day, 24/7, during this pandemic to ensure that those in our care remain safe and well. DSPs are the heart of our mission, and they work hard long hours.

The work of a DSP includes managing medical and daily personal care needs, providing behavior health supports, offering coaching and skill-building to help people experiencing I/DD obtain and maintain employment, and helping often isolated members of our society make real and meaningful connections in the community. Though the work of a DSP is somewhat similar to a Certified Nursing Assistant, their role in ensuring full integration and opportunity to people experiencing I/DD makes their job a more expansive profession – touching lives of people in a myriad of ways.

Furthermore, DSPs do this work even when their own lives may be a struggle. DSPs themselves are often from some of our more vulnerable community members:

- DSPs are a Diverse Workforce -- 87% are women; 59% are people of color; and 27% are immigrants
- DSPs have persistently low wages and are part of our nation's working poor; the starting wages hover often just above minimum and the current average wage is between \$13-\$14/hour.
- Many DSPs are single parents, dependent on one income and struggling with the high costs of child care, housing, etc.

Sadly, our DSPs can make more money at McDonalds or Walmart, even though theirs is not minimum wage work. With current starting wages hovering just above minimum, Horizon Project and other provider agencies compete with entry level jobs paying a starting wage of \$2-4/hour higher than what our funding supports. Low wages result in both recruitment and retention challenges. As an industry we are losing long-term, seasoned employees to higher paying opportunities at an unprecedented rate.

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While DSPs are not state employees, DSPs fulfill state and federal obligations to care for people experiencing I/DD, many of whom come to us homeless or abused and often with complex health issues. As with our own budget, the average provider agency across Oregon receives over 98% of its operations funding for operations through the state funding system.

Our industry is floundering, and we need our elected officials to stand with us. We need our legislature to fully fund I/DD Direct Support Professionals – reflecting our collective value for their work by increasing our ability to raise their wages. How did we get here? For over a decade state funding for our work has languished, causing our industry to barely get by and fall behind competitive wages and benefits in the marketplace. It is time to not only catch up but to do better.

How do we get there?

POP 119 - \$34.4M GF -- Funding this POP closes the gap from the 2019-21/rolls up to 21-23 and ensures no significant rate/wage reductions. Includes 3.2% across the board rate increase in the current rate models in the 1st year of the biennium and new rate models in 2nd year of biennium. However, it still doesn't yet achieve the wages needed for our industry to recruit and retain qualified DSPs in a competitive workplace.

POP 120 - \$36.6M GF – Though certainly some improvement, approving this POP will fund rates and wages to only about 80% of full funding needed, or about a 3% rate increase across the board.

Fully Funded Rate Model - \$48.8M -- This would greatly enhance our industry's ability to respond to the current staffing crisis by enabling us to offer more competitive wages.

HB 2964 – \$110.2M – Passing HB 2964 – submitted now as SB 5529 – This is the solution to a historically underfunded public obligation. This is the policy that will alleviate current inequities and create a sustainable funding model into the future. This policy bill ensures direct support professionals are funded at least 150% of the metro area minimum wage and includes provisions to ensure that our industry can recruit and retain skilled professionals into the future.

I appreciate the weight of the decisions in your hands. Thank you for your consideration. And thank you for all you do to support Oregonians.

Regards,

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