

April 20, 2021

Dear Members of the Ways & Means Committee,

I am writing to you both as a family member of an individual who relies on Direct Support Professionals for daily living, and as a former DSP myself. I live in Ashland, Oregon.

My brother Andy has been in adult residential care in Oregon since he turned 18, and has intellectual and physical disabilities that require him to rely almost totally on the caregivers employed by his home. DSPs not only make sure that his meals, medications and daily routines are taken care of, they also are his best friends and his family.

Some of the best experiences of Andy's life have been with DSPs. They have danced with him, made him laugh, and comforted him when he was down. They have stayed with him in the hospital and encouraged him to walk and talk again after a major health setback a few years ago.

Andy loves to live in community and would never be happy living alone even if he was able to. Unfortunately, being close to his DSPs has caused Andy no shortage of heartache, either. Despite the level of care that some individuals bring to the work, the rate of pay makes this a "disposable" job. I cannot count the number of times I have come to visit Andy at his prior residential care home, when a single staff person was running around frantically, working their 14th or 18th hour that shift, or their 60th hour that week, because a coworker quit suddenly. Andy has missed medication, sometimes for months, without staff catching the error because everyone is new to the job. The mission of the residential care homes Andy has lived in has always been something to the effect of "helping individuals thrive". How can he thrive when staff are not around long enough to learn his favorite foods, his favorite song, his hopes and fears?

And yet DSPs do the hard work. They physically help him get up when he is too tired, make sure he stays clean and doesn't wander out of the house alone. They keep a mountain of required notes and documentation (even more so since COVID). They take him to his appointments and adapt his ever-changing needs. Then one day, they realize they can make the same or more amount of money as a fast-food worker or grocery clerk, with a fraction of the responsibility, they leave. Someone else must pick up where they left off. And Andy loses a friend.

In addition to being a family member of an individual in adult residential care, I have also worked as a DSP myself. Three years ago, I needed part-time work, so I took a job as a DSP in the home of a young autistic man. He was fun, affable, and prone to outbursts that soon had me working on my self-defense skills. I poured myself into that job, learning all I could about this man's disability so that I could better help him learn

to manage his emotions and impulses. I formed a genuine connection with him and was willing to suffer a few bumps and bruises so that we could both learn and grow. I didn't do it for the pay. I have never seen DSP work as a viable career option because it's not the kind of money you can build a life on. When COVID came along, I paused my DSP work, and I don't think I will go back. I miss the challenge, I miss the heartfelt connections, and most of all, I miss the young man I was working with. I can only hope that the next person who cares for him will stay a bit longer.

Maybe the budget you vote in this year will make it possible. With a new, fully funded rate model and a strong IDD budget that focuses on DSP wages, these professionals may at last obtain a rate of pay on par with the responsibilities and difficulties of this work.

Please support POP 119 and POP 120, crucial steps toward meeting the goal of paying DSPs 150% of minimum wage. The work they do is priceless.

Thank you for taking the time to review my testimony.

Sincerely,

Tuula Rebhahn