

Oregon State Legislature
Joint Ways and Committee

Submitted online: <https://olis.oregonlegislature.gov/liz/2021R1/Testimony/JWM>

22 April 2021

RE: Public Comments of Bethesda Lutheran Communities Concerning OR HB2964

On behalf of Bethesda Lutheran Communities, I thank Co-Chair Senator Johnson, Co-Chair Senator Steiner Hayward, and Co-Chair Representative Rayfield, for convening these hearings and for allowing written testimony to be submitted from constituents. **I ask that this committee prioritize funding for intellectual and developmental disability (ID/DD) support services that create a sustainable disability services system for your most vulnerable constituents and creates a living wage scale for direct support professionals (DSPs)**

Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) provide crucial supports to adults and children with ID/DD. Their work includes managing medical needs, behavior health supports, intimate care, support to maintain employment, and services to make real connections in the community. This diverse workforce is 87% women, 59% people of color and 27% immigrant. They have faced persistently low wages with a current average wage of \$13.94. The work of DSPs is complex and certainly not minimum wage work, yet low wages force agencies, like Bethesda Lutheran Communities, to compete with minimum wage jobs.

While DSPs are NOT state employees – their work is almost entirely funded by state and federally matched funds (average of 98.2%). That is why we need your support to increase wages for this crucial workforce. Please support a realistic Oregon disability services budget with a focus on fully funding DSP wages. These workers have been on the frontlines through the COVID-19 crisis and were a lifeline to people with ID/DD during last summer's tragic wildfires and Oregon's recent ice storm. They deserve a significant investment in their wages in 2021.

Simply put, the Oregon ID/DD service system is in crisis. As essential frontline workers, DSPs have been a lifesaving resource for people with disabilities during the COVID19 pandemic. But, even before the pandemic ID/DD service providers were facing severe worker shortages and dire hiring outlooks. It is extremely challenging to recruit and hire DSPs with the expertise and qualifications necessary to provide high-quality disability supports for people with significant medical and behavioral needs at the starting wages listed above.

Turnover rates for staff in disability long-term services and services remains around 45 percent. And, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) predicts that employment for personal care aides will grow by 26 percent between 2014 and 2024, and by 38 percent for home health aides, two categories which encompass frontline DSPs. This contrasts to a national average of 7 percent growth for other occupations. This clearly illustrates that this crisis will grow significantly if not addressed immediately by the Oregon legislature.

Many Oregon DSPs must rely on other state funds like Medicaid, housing subsidies and snap benefits to survive. Funding ID/DD services in Oregon at rates that allow providers to pay living wages will create a sustainable solution to this harsh reality. It is critical that this committee consider the cost savings to other Oregon health and human services when assessing the costs of the bill.

I look forward to working with this committee and the Oregon Legislature to address any questions or concerns regarding the current issues in the Oregon ID/DD system and creating a more responsive health and human services delivery system that addresses the unique needs of your most vulnerable constituents.

Respectfully,

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