

February 4, 2022

To: Senate Committee on Human Services, Mental Health and Recovery

Dear Committee,

I am writing to urge the passing of SB 1556, to establish a certification process for direct care workers and implement an online registry for such workers in home- and community-based services (HCBS). I am Chair of the Residential Ombuds and Public Guardian Advisory Board, ROPGAB (a volunteer citizen board tasked with overseeing and advocating on behalf of the Long Term Care Ombudsman and Residential Facilities Ombudsman). However, I am submitting this letter of support as a geriatrics and palliative care physician who conducts all of my patient care in homes and residential facilities, not a statement that has been voted on by ROPGAB.

As a geriatrics and palliative care physician whose patients all experience some level of cognitive or functional impairment, I am acutely aware of the crisis we are drowning in as a result of a pandemic that has decimated an already fragile and devalued direct care workforce. Nationally, 70% of adults who reach the age of 65 will need some type of long term services and support during the rest of their lifetime. Between the reports I receive in ROPGAB from LTCO and RFO, and my direct patient care, I see too many Oregonians suffering avoidable medical decline, loneliness, failure to thrive, and neglect because of facility short-staffing and family difficulties hiring and keeping home-based caregivers. This can manifest as a wife who sinks into depression and illness due to her husband's in-home caregivers who quit. This can manifest as residents in Memory Care who start to lose weight en masse. A visit to the dining room shows a single caregiver patiently trying to assist and hand-feed 14 residents who mostly require some type of feeding assistance. It can manifest as one caregiver and one medtech who show up for a swing shift at a 70-bed assisted living facility when others are out sick. Over the past 2 years, scores of direct care workers have burned out or been harmed on top of their baseline persistent struggle to make their ends meet or to see any kind of future career growth potential.

SB 1556 is a start for Oregon to demonstrate a commitment to supporting and developing the direct care workforce. Establishing Certification is the right thing to do. It will create standards by which direct care workers can obtain stackable training that allows them to show increasing knowledge, skills, and experience, and to apply their skills across settings without having to repeat training. Certification creates a universal criteria by which families seeking in-home caregivers, or facilities hiring direct care workers, can all expect a level of expertise. Creating a registry will both ensure that direct care workers enrolled in the registry have met Certification criteria, and better enable Oregonians seeking home-based care and residential facility employers to find direct care workers that match their needs.

This is not all that is needed to build and sustain the direct care workforce. But establishing Certification and a registry help towards other needed efforts to expand apprenticeship models, create career ladder opportunities, and secure living wages and benefits for certified workers. I realize progress often occurs one step at a time. I urge the Committee and legislative colleagues to pass SB 1556 as a critical step toward supporting Oregon's direct care workforce.

Thank you,



Helen Kao, MD

Lumina Hospice & Palliative Care, Benton County

Chair, Residential Ombuds and Public Guardian Advisory Board