

February 10, 2023

House Committee on Early Childhood and Human Services  
Oregon State Legislature  
900 Court St. NE  
Salem, PR 97301

Dear Chair Reynolds, Vice-Chair Nguyen, Vice-Chair Scharf, and members of the Committee:

My name is Stephanie Hunter and I am a behavior specialist that works for an agency, Opportunity Foundation, supporting adults with disabilities and I also provide in-home behavior support to children and families in Central Oregon.

I am writing to urge the committee to support HB 2457 that would increase wages for direct support providers. It is crucially important that any levers that are possible are utilized to increase wages for caregivers. In Central Oregon the housing costs are outrageous and it is difficult to find a rental. We have limited public transportation and many of the employees at Opportunity Foundation have to live in rural areas requiring a vehicle and a 30-45 minute drive to their job. Child care is severely lacking and expensive making it even more difficult for families to live on caregiver wages. We have employees that have become unhoused and if they are lucky live in motels or with extended family but they may also have to live unsheltered in vehicles.

The families I work with are hanging on by a thread and lose their direct support staff to food service, remote, and retail jobs that pay more than caregiver wages. Budgets are moral documents and they show what a state values. The Governor's budget priorities are a good start and I would also ask you to look very closely at how wages are contributors to houselessness, rise in mental health needs, addiction, education outcomes, and also the costs of higher levels of care. The families I work with sometimes have to make the choice to place their child in a foster home or group home because they cannot find or keep caregivers. Many of their children are only receiving 1-3 hours of schooling a day or less because public schools limit their time. The health and safety issues become so serious that they place their precious child into the care of someone else. The state will end up paying these costs of higher levels of care and the ongoing trauma and issues that can contribute to a poor outcome for that child.

There is a myth that caregiving is not skilled labor. I have been a direct support provider and have worked in the developmental disability field for over 23 years and can bust that myth based on firsthand experience. It is especially difficult now with the staffing shortages and the levels of chronic stress that caregivers experience. Caregivers are often loyal and stay because they care about the people they support. It is exploitive to place them in positions of choosing values over their quality of life.

Thank you for your leadership and consideration of supporting this bill.

Thank you,

Stephanie Hunter