

My name is Candice Zalenski and I have worked as a Direct Support Professional for lifempowered in St Helens for over a decade. I have been one of the many thousands of people who provide personal and professional supports to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Oregon.

Nowhere will you find major headlines highlighting our plight. Nowhere will you find rioters waving signs and setting off loud explosions for attention. Nowhere will you find a legion of lobbyists arguing our ongoing issues.

We are simply too over worked, too underpaid, stretched out over too great a distance...and too stigmatized.

The people we support often have no voices, no independent transportation and quite honestly, may have no idea where or how to even start asking for help.

The legislators of the State of Oregon are solely responsible for how much is spent on this vulnerable, under represented, nearly invisible group. We only get to tackle this budget challenge once every two years, yet the expenses keep climbing daily. We cannot simply raise the price of our products, because our product has no monetary value.

A while back we counted how many unique people supported a person in our care who required profound levels of supports and no way to communicate their needs. Can you believe that the amount, over a mere six months, equaled a busload! That meant nearly 40 people were alone in the bathroom with this person, feeding them their meals and administering medications. Can you imagine if that was your loved one, or possibly you? How would that affect your quality of life? How uncomfortable would you feel?!

It is all due to being short staffed, high turnover and general chaos created by the unstable funding we face constantly.

It makes obvious sense that we stabilize this funding so we can spend our energy on supporting the people who depend on us.

Do you know that a great portion of Direct Support Professionals depend on supplemental public assistance, second or third jobs, overtime and other methods to stay afloat? It is still often the case that we have to move on from this profession because we simply cannot afford to stay.

I could rattle off dozens of roles we take on in this profession. Each on their own would provide us a decent wage in our community. Yet, doing these things as a Direct Support Professional somehow makes them less valuable. We become a cheap chef, a cheap behaviorist, a cheap nutritionist, a cheap counselor, a cheap teacher and so on.

We as a state can do what's right and move forward in prioritizing the needs of this important, under represented group. We can create better lives for people who deserve it. The people we serve did not choose to be disabled. The workforce keeping them healthy, safe and happy should be rewarded appropriately for doing the difficult, professional job of serving them.

I support any effort to provide greater, more stable funding that improves the lives of people with disabilities and the workforce who help empower them to thrive.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.