

Attn: Joint Ways & Means Committee

From: John Oorthuys, TVW Inc BOD.

Date: April 8, 2023

Subject: Increase Direct Support Professional (DSP) Wages,

My name is John Oorthuys, and I serve on the Board of Directors of TVW Inc.

I have been directly involved with supported employment since 1988. At that time, I was a supervisor at NEC America. We initiated an enclave within one of my production groups with the support of the University of Oregon and the State of Oregon.

We employed 8 individuals with sever disabilities, performing the same work as the rest of the workforce. I came to see that these individuals have the same aspirations as the rest of us.

I joined the Board of TVW in 1989. At that time, TVW was a workshop that brought in individuals with disabilities, and the work for them to perform. I had a lot of issues with this model. People were separated from the community, they were paid sub-minimum wage and a lot of the work was simple and repetitive.

At NECAM, the individuals with disabilities were distributed throughout the workforce. They became integrated into the work teams. They started having lunch with their coworkers and even joined them for weekend activities. This is the model that I believe in. These people are part of our community and should be treated as such. I learned that their capabilities have been hugely underestimated.

TVW is a nonprofit Employment agency based in Hillsboro. We support the employment choices and goals of individuals living with mental illness, developmental disabilities, and other disabilities. The people who do the direct coaching and support of our job seekers are skilled professionals that deserve a sustainable wage. The workforce crisis in Oregon has harmed our ability to expand our services to more people with disabilities, and we expect it to worsen without your support in raising these essential workers' wages.

In addition, we need your support to increase Direct Support Professional (DSP) wages. The previous investment allowed us to increase our workforce's wages by \$1.25 an hour (the current average reimbursement wage for DSPs in Oregon is \$17.81). Because we have long-term employees, many of our employees already make beyond that wage. Our starting wages are now above that reimbursement average, yet we still struggle to recruit and retain the Job Coaches (DSPs) needed to support our clients and accept new clients.

I am writing to ask that you protect your previous investment and continue to fund the IDD services budget fully.

Being a Job Coach is a complex job. It means helping people with disabilities explore their skills and dreams as they navigate the workforce, often for the first time. Our team also supports people through disability-related barriers and coordinates support within a complex system

that requires ongoing progress notes and state agency requirements. It is not minimum wage or entry-level work. Yet, providers like us continue to compete with entry-level wage jobs at retailers, restaurants, delivery companies, etc., when recruiting for DSPs.

DSPs do the daily support and build relationships that include trusted connections with our clients and their families. They are valued deeply and are a needed part of our clients' everyday lives. We must find a path to sustain this critical workforce before it is too late so that current and future Oregonians with disabilities have access to the work and life supports they need to live full and rich lives.

I ask that you include ODDS POP 132 in the budget, which outlines the funding needed to move this workforce forward. This proposed POP increases DSP wages and adjusts for inflation.

In 2021, the Oregon legislature approved total funding of the IDD services rate model, and we made needed progress toward paying DSPs a living wage. It wasn't everything we needed, but it started moving things in the right direction for DSPs.

Sadly, this win was quickly eroded by inflation and steeply rising wages across Oregon. As state partners, we rely on you to approve funding for these needed services. The current level of funding is based on cost studies that are years old. We are already paying DSP wages above the reimbursement rate, yet wages have fallen behind the market. We now compete with jobs like fast food that used to be considered minimum wage positions, and we are losing in this competition. We need your support to change this path. We need POP 132 to bump DSP wages up to make it through the next one or two years.

I know you face several competing priorities, but if we cannot support our most vulnerable families, what will that say about Oregon? Supporting this bill also moves forward Oregon's efforts toward improved diversity, equity, and inclusion in employment. Per National Core Indicator data (2020), this workforce is primarily female (71%), and 44.8% come from BIPOC communities.

Funding POP 132 will result in an immediate, positive impact on our mission and those we serve.

Oregonians with disabilities need a stable system they can count on for their daily support needs, and that system is only possible because of Oregon's amazing Direct Support Professionals. If you would like to learn more about our mission or the wonderful DSPs that make it possible, please reach out. We would love to continue to share the value of this work with you.

Please support higher wages for our Direct Support Professionals.

Respectfully,

John Oorthuys

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