

**To:** Joint Ways & Means Committee  
**From:** Amber Robles Myre, Chief Executive Officer of Living Opportunities Inc  
**Date:** 4-22-23  
**Subject:** **Please support our Direct Support Professional workforce - Value the Work, Raise the Wage!**

My name is Amber Myre and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Living Opportunities Inc. Living Opps is a private, non-profit organization that has partnered with the State of Oregon since 1974 to provide support at home, work, and in our communities to people who experience Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities (I/DD) and their families. I am also a member of the Oregon Resource Association and the DD Coalition, so I am here representing not just Living Opps but stakeholder organizations from across the state.

As you are well aware, we are all facing economic headwinds, with hiring a dedicated workforce being among the greatest challenges, especially in areas such as Southern Oregon, where the pool of potential candidates is smaller than in the Portland-Metro area or the Mid-Willamette Valley. The work required is person-centered often-involving personal care and critical to those we serve, yet the average food service employee can make more per hour. We are left recruiting those with a true heart for service, but we desperately need a wage that can help us retain them.

Living Opps employs over 150 Direct Support Professionals – known as DSPs. DSPs are frontline workers and essential to meeting our mission of, supporting people to live the life of their choosing from where they live and who they live with, to joining the workforce and sharing in the opportunities available to all in our communities. DSPs are much more than caregivers, they help, support, guide, and mentor the people we serve with I/DD (Autism, Down Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Fragile X, etc) in all aspects of their lives; intimate personal care, nurse delegated tasks such as G-tubes and ostomy care, communication, job training, education, hospice care and more.

As a full time DSP myself for many years before I worked up into leadership roles, I relied on multiple income sources to provide for my family. At one point, I even had to quit the DSP job I loved, due to the increased costs of daycare and rent outpacing my wages. I returned to this workforce because we truly make a difference and have an impact on people's lives and successes. Many of our DSP's continue to sacrifice time with their families, struggle being able to afford rent, gas etc. When there are emergencies in our communities, like wildfires, our DSP's step up to care for and prioritize the people they support. In 2020 many of our DSP's were working when the Alameda Fire destroyed their homes, they were helping evacuate and

ensure the safety of the people they supported, all the while wondering what was happening to their own homes and families. **They deserve a wage that reflects the difficult and challenging work they do.**

**This is not minimum wage work**, yet despite Living Opps commitment to fair, competitive wages **we are continually thrust into direct competition with fast food restaurants, retail stores and coffee shops who start workers at \$16 to \$20 per hour.** For too long, DSPs have been underpaid and therefore undervalued.

**We cannot compete, so we cannot find workers.** Since we cannot find workers, we are forced to reduce our capacity - a vicious cycle that is replicated across our state and leaving people with I/DD and their families without desperately needed support and, at times, staying in dangerous situations without the help of providers like us. **You can reverse this trend by providing funding to increase wages for DSP and value their work.**

Living Opps and organizations like ours partner with the state and contract with ODDS to provide these important services and depend on your funding and investment in the services we provide. **ODDS has acknowledged the need to address DSP wages with the proposed Policy Option Package 132.** This proposed POP is a start to addressing the long term crisis in the DSP workforce by adding inflation and rate increases that bring DSP wages in payment category 1 to \$19.36 in the first year of the biennium. **This proposed investment is essential to the survival of these important services.**

We cannot simply raise our prices to increase wages - we rely on the funding you approve to provide these services. **Only you can impact this issue.** The current funding provides for an average wage of \$17.81. Currently, Living Opp's average wage is \$20.85 and we still have constant open positions. **The situation is not sustainable.** The current funding system does not provide cost of living increases, yet minimum wage increases every year based on the consumer price index. We make some progress with wages and then fall behind once minimum wage increases and then we again compete with minimum wage jobs. This workforce deserves an opportunity to make this work their career.

Despite raising wages 38% since 2019, we are still struggling to recruit and retain employees. **Providers are already paying above the average reimbursement rate and it just isn't enough. We don't have any more to give. We need you to step up and help us ensure that people in need continue to have options for services.**

The workforce shortage has a devastating impact on organizations, families, and most of all the

people who rely on these services. It not only affects their quality of life, but their very health and safety. We must act together to reverse this trend and ensure that people with I/DD are provided with the safety net of quality support they deserve.

Investing in DSP wages is not only the right thing to do, it is an investment that will pay dividends in outcomes. A strong, well trained DSP workforce will reduce overtime, workers compensation, hiring, and recruiting costs just to name a few. All these cost reductions can be reinvested into wages, benefits, and training for DSP's which will in turn incentivize the Direct Support Professional role as a real career option. Additionally, investments in this workforce by the State of Oregon are **matched with Federal funds**. In this scenario, the system wins, DSP's win, Oregon wins and most importantly, Oregonians with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities are provided safe and the quality support that they deserve.

If we don't invest in DSP wages now and in the future, it sends the message that we do not value their work. The realities of undervaluing DSPs is playing out all around us, but it is not too late to turn this around. This is your opportunity to send a message that Oregonian's value our vulnerable citizens and those that provide the support they need to be active, valued members of their communities. It will allow us to create a career path for DSPs that will stabilize and grow this workforce. It will allow us, once again, to open our doors to serving more people in need. **Most importantly it will ensure that children and adults receiving services in Oregon can count on a strong, stable, mission focused workforce that will not only help them stay healthy and safe but live the life they want and deserve.**

Thank You