



To: Joint Ways & Means Committee

From: Carrie Brickey, Executive Director of Alternative Services-Oregon, INC. (ASI-OR)

Date: 5/5/23

Subject: Support our Direct Support Professional workforce - **Value the Work, Raise the Wage!**

My name is Carrie Brickey and I am the Executive Director of Alternative Services-Oregon, INC. (ASI-OR). We are a non-profit organization that has been providing residential and employment services for individuals (adults and children) with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities (I/DD) in Oregon since 1989. We are dedicated to providing quality support for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. ASI has one goal in mind: Support the individuals we serve to experience meaningful lives.

ASI employs over 200 Direct Support Professionals (DSP's) statewide, and they are the livelihood of our company. DSP's not only need to have the skillset for managing complex medical and behavioral challenges, but they also need compassion and empathy. The relationships and trust DSP's build with the individuals we support is what makes the difference in someone having a rewarding, safe and healthy life. We require a lot of our DSP's. They undergo rigorous training that includes classes, certifications and hands on learning. There are high expectations and immense pressure because the lives of vulnerable people are in DSP's hands. This is **not** minimum wage work, but we are competing with minimum wage jobs that are now consistently hiring workers over \$17 an hour.

Sadly, the impacts of the workforce crisis have changed our organization drastically. In 2019 we supported 135 people in 36 24-hour residential programs and had zero vacancies. As of today, we support 92 people in 29 residential programs. We've had to reduce our size and capacity for supporting individuals solely based on the issue of not having enough DSP's to recruit and retain. We simply did not feel that we could keep individuals safe with the uncertainty of the current staffing challenges. Across the State we have 6 vacancies in our residential programs that we are not able to fill because there are not enough staff. This is incredibly disheartening when I know there are individuals out there that are looking for, and needing, a safe place to live. Even with reducing our capacity and reducing our programs, we are still short nearly 100 DSP's for our programs to be "fully staffed". This perpetuates the cycle of burnout from overtime and stress that falls on the shoulders of the current employees and managers. The turnover rate for us, and other providers like us, is incredibly high.

The 2021 Legislature made a historic investment in services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and for the first time the I/DD system was FULLY FUNDED. Even though this investment allowed us to increase wages for DSPs by \$1.25 an hour (current average reimbursement wage for DSPs at \$17.81), we, and other providers like us, still have a DSP vacancy rate of 23% and higher. We cannot just offer higher wages; **we rely on the funding you approve** to provide these services for individuals with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities. ASI currently offers a starting DSP wage (\$19/hour) that is over a dollar more than what current funding provides, and we are still having problems recruiting DSP's at that hourly wage. Continuing to increase our hourly wage to be competitive, without a change in our funding, will not be sustainable and I am very fearful where our system is heading.

You can make this better. ODDS Pop 132 makes two critical investments in DSP's. It includes wage inflation and rate increases that make DSP wages competitive, and increases the health insurance assumption. I am relying on you. Thousands of DSP's in Oregon are relying on you. Some of the most vulnerable Oregonians and their families are relying on you. Please show you understand the magnitude of this issue and support ODDS Pop 132 in the budget.

Sincerely,

Carrie Brickey
Executive Director