



House Committee on Early Childhood and Human Services  
February 12, 2024

Good afternoon, Chair Reynolds and Vice Chairs Scharf and Nguyen, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today. For the record, my name is Melissa Unger and I am the executive director of SEIU Local 503.

I want to start my testimony by talking about the union's vision for care in our state. For the last 25 years, homecare workers, personal support workers, people who work in facilities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and nursing home care workers have been coming together through their union to advocate for a system that better supports people that need supports and care in whatever setting is most appropriate for themselves and their families.

We envision a system that lifts up the consumer and their needs, respects the workers that provide care, ensures that all people have access to information so they can make the best decisions for themselves, including options to stay in their homes. We work for a system that puts money where it matters—into providing enough hours for the consumers and clients that need them and into the wages and benefits of the workers that provide the care and support. A system where workers can see a career in caregiving, so they can continue to do the work they care about. A system that supports and invests people in our communities that are often overlooked, people with physical disabilities, older Oregonians, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

I have had the opportunity to work alongside homecare workers for the last 17 years and the stories you heard today are amplified by thousands of workers throughout the state. Workers have made real progress for homecare workers—raised their wages, made sure they are covered by worker's compensation, gained health insurance, dental insurance and more. But when I talk with workers, they still don't feel respected. And to be honest, it is because it continues to be challenging to be a homecare worker through the state.

Pay systems are difficult, computer systems are outdated, information is not given in the language they speak, background checks are slow, and the list goes on. Workers will often say they spend more time on the systems and trying to figure out how to do the work. We believe HB 4129 is a part of a solution to these challenges.

Over the next ten years, the trends show that we will face more and more people that need in-home services. Oregon has always been an innovator in care, whether it is creating the first community-based care facilities or leading alongside Washington state on homecare, we have led the way in

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making sure that people can live with choice, independence and dignity as they age. We believe this bill is really the next step in that work.

According to the Oregon Employment Department, in 2022 there were more difficult-to-fill vacant positions for Personal Care Aides than for any other occupation in Oregon. At the same time, the demand for these jobs is growing, expected to increase by 26% between 2021 and 2031. We must bring new workers into caregiving jobs and take care of those workers willing to do these difficult jobs. Of all long-term care options, Homecare is the most cost-effective, least restrictive, and has many safety benefits compared to other settings. In-home care maximizes consumer choice, control, dignity, and autonomy, and it keeps people in their own communities. We have submitted a research report for the record to expand on these realities, including citations.

As you have heard today, this bill has strong support from case managers and homecare workers. These workforces are united in advocating for the Homecare Modernization Act because they understand firsthand the dire consequences of the current system's shortcomings on both clients and caregivers. As frontline workers, they witness the administrative burdens, workforce shortages, and inadequate support structures that hinder effective care delivery and jeopardize the well-being of people who rely on these critical services.

With the influx of people that will need care in the future, we need to continue to adapt and update our systems. We believe that is what Agency with Choice will do. It is an option for in-home supports that many states use, that we hope can solve some of the challenges workers face in their work, and that we can maintain the programs we have so we can learn, adapt and meet the needs to people that rely on care. This bill will provide an additional option for consumers, workers, and case managers as they try to ensure people can stay in their homes.

Finally, I know that the Freedom Foundation is here testifying in opposition to the bill and has amendments. The Freedom Foundation's stated goal is to oppose unions. Homecare workers, through their union, have been able to increase their pay, fight for their consumers hours, and fight to make care a respected job. The Freedom Foundation does not have an agenda that lifts up caregivers or their consumers, but instead seem concerned with workers ability to come together through their union to have power to change working conditions.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I am happy to take questions from the committee.

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