

May 29, 2025

Chair Hartman, Vice-Chairs and Members of the House Early Childhood and Human Services Committee

Good Morning—

My name is Kathryn Nichols. I am here to testify in strong support of SB 20. Some of you may know us from our family's advocacy for SB420 during the 2023 Session. We thank you for your support in creating Oregon's new Brain Injury Office in DHS. The new office opened its phone lines earlier this year. We are getting strong reports from patients and families that are benefiting from those services.

You've heard our son's story about how the asset and income caps in the EPD program challenge his efforts to transition back to employment after his accident. Dave's journey is chronicled in this brief video: <https://vimeo.com/864070590>. Like many in the disability world he just wants to live independently and pursue a life that most of us without disability take for granted.

I want to yield my limited time to share another story of an EPD client. His name is Alex Agan and he really wanted to be here. But as a quadriplegic it is not possible for him to make it down to Salem for an early morning hearing.

Alex is a school classmate of our son and has become a close family friend. He graduated from U of O in 2014 and began his sales career at Hewlett Packard with a bright future before him. A year later, Alex suffered a spinal cord injury in a diving accident. It left him paralyzed. But Alex, like Dave, is a warrior and he committed himself with grit and determination to re-enter the workforce and achieve his lifelong goals.

I remember hearing early on from his father what a godsend Oregon's EPD program was for Alex. For a quadriplegic the process of getting up and ready for work in the morning is a herculean effort and can take several hours. It absolutely requires in-home support that is not covered by private insurance, only Medicaid. Without the personal care assistance provided through EPD Alex says he never would have had the opportunity to return to work.

Alex enrolled in EPD and re-joined Hewlett Packard in 2017. He was an immediate contributor to a highly successful federal sales team. While working at HP, he met and married his wife, Cassie, who was then working as a teacher. They have settled down in West Linn, with a dog, two cats, in a home that is adapted to meet his needs. In 2023

Alex moved on to join a Portland start-up. But that job ended with widespread layoffs last year.

Alex is actively applying for sales positions. He says he is between a rock and a hard place when it comes to EPD. Because of his success, he can no longer seek a promotion or further his career without exceeding the income cap. He and his wife really want to start a family, but income and asset caps make it nearly impossible to envision how they would raise a child, manage cost-of-living increases, and build even a modest emergency fund. With an asset cap set at just \$5,000, any effort toward financial stability is not only discouraged but penalized.

Alex has considered leaving the EPD program altogether, but a quick calculation of the cost for private caregiving with the number of hours that he requires would be upwards of \$7,000 a month. No feasible promotion or opportunity could ever fill that gap.

Like many of you, our family has watched with fear and dismay as national policy makers move toward dismantling the systems of health care for those who need them most. Oregon has been in the forefront leveraging Federal Medicaid resources to increase access to affordable health care for vulnerable Oregonians through the Oregon Health Plan. Passage of SB 20 would help shore up our EPD program and create a stronger work incentive. Along our journey we have met many smart, capable and motivated folks in the disability community who very much want to work. Many are ready to work in the sectors that desperately need them.

Alex had his first chance to visit the Legislature earlier this session on one of our Advocacy Days for SB 20. He and his wife, Cassie, and his parents join with us and ***Oregon's Disability Health and Employment Equity Coalition to urge passage of SB 20. We hope you will stand with us and work to ensure funding for passage of this important legislation.***

Grateful for all you do for Oregonians,

Kathryn Nichols
9880 SW Arborcrest Way
Portland, OR 97225