

Hello, my name is Lenore Eklund, I'm a resident of Portland and a parent directly impacted by the issue addressed in Senate Bill 538. My daughter, Charlee Eklund, is eight-years old and has multiple medical complex needs. She uses a wheelchair, is non-verbal, requires a g-tube for nutrition, and needs daily airway suctioning. She needs full assistance to access all of her daily activities.

When the COVID-19 Federal Public Health Emergency began, I was hired to provide care for Charlee. With the healthcare worker shortage, not only was I an asset for the state but I also brought a level of experience and qualification that can only be found in a parent of a child with disabilities. Using my specialized skill set, I was able to maintain a stable and reliable routine for Charlee. Because of the extent of time I was with Charlee, I was more in tune with changes in mood, energy level, and quality of sleep, all of which could indicate something serious when there is a change from baseline. Before I was able to be paid as her caregiver, Charlee was admitted to the ER at least twice a year, resulting in costly hospital stays. Under my care, she did not require a single emergency visit—saving the state an estimated \$72,000 over two years.

Since the allowance ended in May 2023, Charlee has struggled with the constant turnover of caregivers, leading to increased frustration and self-harm. Caregivers come and go, and that's a fact of life we have come to accept. Even the ones who have been with Charlee longest have opportunities arise or health events come up that have led to weeks or months away. Charlee thrives with consistency, but new caregivers take time to learn her unique communication style, body language, and needs. Their inexperience can cause frustration, making it even harder for her to receive the support she requires.

This issue isn't just about our family—it's about countless families across the state facing similar challenges. During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents like me stepped in as paid

caregivers, not only easing the strain on an overburdened healthcare system but providing unmatched, consistent care that improved outcomes and reduced costs.

To highlight the profound impact of this program, I edited a 20-minute featurette (https://youtu.be/BvfpHXdb_wo) from a listening session where parents and caregivers shared their experiences. Their stories underscore the critical importance of Senate Bill 538—not just for the well-being of medically complex children like Charlee, but for the health and stability of families across Oregon.

I urge you to support Senate Bill 538 and recognize the value of parents as essential caregivers. By reinstating this allowance, you're not just funding care—you're investing in better health outcomes, reduced emergency interventions, and the overall well-being of our most vulnerable Oregonians. Thank you for your time and consideration.