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On Behalf Of:  
Committee: Senate Committee On Health Care  
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB538

Hello, my name is Christopher Merritt.

My wife, Jasmine, and I have two children who have been diagnosed level 3 ASD, with sub-diagnoses of ADHD and receptive and expressive language disorder. Their disabilities mean they exhibit unsafe behaviors. Our younger child is mostly non-verbal, which really limits constructive communication, and his older brother, while more communicative, still cannot answer questions such as why he did something.

Both kids have bouts of aggression, so Jasmine and I constantly have bites, scratches, and bruises. Jasmine received a concussion this summer when our older child struck her in the head with a tablet, and she is still suffering trauma from it. The kids wake up at any hour of the night and will be up for the rest of the day, meaning one of us loses out on sleep to be with them.

I have a full time job, so Jasmine will often take these shifts. Because of their high needs, she is forced to be a stay at home mom. We have had numerous calls over the years from their school requesting her to come help because one of our children is or was in a dangerous situation. She has helped get our younger child down from shelves, from chained up gym mats, and had to take him to the ER after he fell from the classroom ceiling where his teachers showed poor lack of judgement in not performing a restraint to keep him safe. Additionally, he has now refused to ride the bus home, so one of us has to pick him up from school, which has long been her.

At the same time, his brother was a victim of unnecessary and inappropriate restraints by teachers and aides in another classroom, which we only know about due to bus videos. We will never know how much abuse he suffered before we were able to pull him from that school, but he did lose a permanent front tooth there, and the only witness on the incident form was the aide who we saw performing these restraints on video.

Jasmine has a degree in psychology, which she uses every day with our children. She worked as a care giver for adults with developmental disabilities for five years before having children and having to stay home to raise them as we could not afford child care. She has student loans she is still paying off for a degree she currently cannot use to make money. As a four person family with a single income, money is tight, and the increasing prices on everything from groceries to utilities to taxes is only making things tighter.

Plus, our older child has a compulsion to rip things, so if he finds a hole in his (or his brother's) clothing, that clothing will be torn open, meaning we often need to purchase more shirts, pants, underwear, and socks for him, more than would be needed for a neurotypical child who just grows out of clothes or has the occasional accident.

While the State will pay for caregivers, it is nearly impossible to find people willing to work with children with the level of needs ours require. Agencies either don't work with older kids, or not with aggressive kids. We have no immediate or extended family who are willing to help, and those who would be willing are not physically capable of caring for our kids.

This program, which would allow my wife to be paid for the higher level of care necessary for our children that she already provides, would be life changing for us. She has neglected medical and dental care for herself because she does not want to be a financial drain on the family. Providing an income would allow her to care for herself guilt-free. It would improve her self-esteem and allow us to better provide for our children and ourselves.

We love our kids, and will do all we can to give them the best life possible. But it is critical that the State follow through with its obligations to people like us. We already have hours allotted to both kids for paid caregivers. Our lives improved during the pandemic when parents were allowed to be caregivers, as did many other families. Do the right thing and support this bill.