



**DISABILITY  
HEALTH & EMPLOYMENT  
EQUITY COALITION**

**Our Mission** is to make Medicaid, healthcare, and employment equitable for people with disabilities in Oregon.

Committee Chair Gelser Blouin, Vice-Chair Lithicum, and fellow members of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee,

My name is Andrew Caruana. My ‘full-time job’ is as a Graduate Student at OSU-Cascades in Bend, Oregon, pursuing a Master of Science in Clinical Mental Health Counseling on a path to LPC licensure. Additionally, I am a Commissioner on the Oregon Disabilities Commission, a member of the City of Bend Accessibility Advisory Committee, and the Legislative Advocacy Coordinator for the Disability Health & Employment Equity Coalition. Although I wear many hats, today, I am here in my capacity as an affected citizen and Coalition member.

My first experience learning about the Coalition’s efforts and SB20 was at the start of the 2023 legislative session when, while onboarding to be a legislative intern for Senator Gelser Blouin, I requested to decline pay to avoid risking my health insurance, which struck up a spirited conversation, and the rest is history.

Unfortunately, the history of the EPD program, although it was well-intentioned, has not been formative or beneficial to its recipients. What was initially envisioned as a way to prioritize fiscal responsibility has resulted in disabled Oregonians being forced to decline raises, remain under-employed, kept us impoverished, and reliant on more public assistance, and, in the worst of cases, forced us to choose between our jobs and access to life-saving medical assistance.

I have been disabled for essentially my whole life, being diagnosed with moderate Cerebral Palsy. Although I navigate the world easily enough as an ambulatory wheelchair user, enjoy healthy social connections, hold a bachelor's Degree with distinction, have a lengthy resume, and am actively pursuing a career in the Mental Health profession, which is, in part, funded by Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation Services the reality I face, like so many others, is that I will either be denied Medicaid under current EPD regulations or I will have to deliberately under-employ myself. Like many Disabled Oregonians, despite the blood, sweat, and tears I have put into achieving independence and making a life for myself, I am being left behind by the services that promised to support me.

What we know now, after several decades of the EPD program, is that the asset and income limits in place – roughly \$17.30 per hour and no more than \$5,000 in total assets not only aren’t sufficient to live off of but because they keep recipients so poor, it forces us to rely on additional assistance meaning that EPD has fallen short of its desire to be a fiscally responsible program.



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Disabled Oregonians want to experience independence and economic freedom through gainful, meaningful employment. We want to be contributing members of our community. We want marriage to be economically viable and to be able to raise families. We want to save for retirement. We want to live our lives to the fullest.

This is our third long session advocating for the passage of this measure: first as SB584, then SB576, and now as SB20. In the 6 years that have passed since this work began, our struggle has only become more dire; more of us have left employment altogether, and more of us have lost our medical benefits, but all of us are suffering, and we are all tired. SB20 is not a wishlist of policy prescriptions; it is not a policy we want; it is a policy we need.

The sad fact for disabled Oregonians is that we are experiencing simultaneous health and economic crises that we and this legislature can no longer sustain. The EPD program in its current form does not work for Disabled Oregonians; it does not work for the State, and urgent action is needed.

Committee Chair Gelser Blouin, Vice-Chair Lithicum, and fellow members of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee, your constituents, the Coalition, and our partners implore you to pass this legislation out of Committee with overwhelming bipartisan support and to fiercely advocate for its full passage until the Governor signs SB20, passed into law, and we are no longer held economically hostage.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this most pressing matter.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Andrew Caruana*

Disability Health & Employment Equity Coalition | Legislative Advocacy Coordinator



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