

My name is Natasha Atkinson, CEO of Umpqua Homes, Inc. in Roseburg. I began my career 25 years ago as a Direct Support Professional (DSP), and I am here to support SB 133.

Agencies like UHI are 98% funded through state reimbursements. Unlike senior care and bargained Personal Support Workers, our section of the system lacks a built-in COLA.

Every year we come before you to advocate for higher DSP wages and as you have heard, we pay an unsustainable average of \$2.50 per hour over what we are reimbursed just to stay competitive. This has created a \$558 million funding gap for community providers alone. A COLA would help solve this problem.

Investing in an annual COLA to support DSP wages will improve service quality and stability for the broad spectrum of individuals who rely on these supports. DSPs serve people with complex needs, including those needing intensive medical support, people with coexisting mental health issues, and people who exhibit challenging behaviors. DSPs perform essential, demanding, skilled work, -they are the backbone of our industry. They serve as advocates for those they support, acting as counselors, CNAs, chefs, and medical technicians.

They transition seamlessly from administering medications, to assisting with intimate tasks- showering/ brief changes, and supporting people through challenging moments, even providing compassionate care to those transitioning with hospice. Despite the complexity of their work, DSPs are not compensated properly. Their wages often make them eligible for programs such as SNAP, TANF, OHP, and housing vouchers.

After hearing testimony about DSP wages at the Road Show last week, a woman from a local food bank expressed her concern, stating, "I was shocked to learn what your DSPs make. I make over \$10 more an hour stocking food and your DSPs are going into people's homes. It's a travesty!" The role of DSP should be one to strive towards, not one to evoke pity. It should attract people due to their compassion, attentiveness, and resiliency.

I urge you to pass SB 133 and invest directly in the workforce that supports individuals with disabilities and the dedicated professionals who serve them. Together, we can create a system that is both effective and compassionate.