

February 10, 2014

Senate Committee on Health Care and Human Services

SB 1542

Written Testimony Submitted by Dawn Martin

Chair Monnes-Anderson and Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB 1542.

My name is Dawn Morgan and I live in Molalla, Oregon. I retired in 2003 and worked for 29 years for the State of Oregon at Disability Determination Services (DDS), which decides disability claims for the Social Security Administration. I worked as a Disability Analyst, Quality Assurance Analyst, and finally as the Agency Trainer.

In 1994 I lost my husband to cancer and decided to stay on the small acreage we bought in 1980. I was able to live independently, caring for my livestock, an orchard and a large garden.

In September 2004 I became totally disabled following an extended hospitalization. In spite of this I continued to live alone with some help doing heavier tasks outside, along with housekeeping tasks.

In 2009 I underwent a radical mastectomy for advanced breast cancer. Another surgery was required because the pathologist wasn't satisfied that all the cancer had been removed. A month later I was scheduled to begin chemotherapy. This required a 2 hour round trip and 2-3 hours for the treatment. Molalla's only mass transit is a bus that connects with Portland's Metro busses. There is nothing else.

I inquired at the Molalla Senior Center and was told that there might be someone willing to take me to Salem. Luckily she was willing to drive her own car and work for minimum wage.

After a month off to recuperate I was scheduled to begin radiation therapy. This was to consist of 5 minute treatments, 5-days a week. My dependable driver just wasn't interested in this. So I started my search all over again. But this time the Senior Center was no help and I was at my wits end when the woman helping me with my housework suggested her granddaughter. I had employed this young woman several years earlier and wasn't entirely pleased with her. I was desperate and agreed to hire her with the understanding that she had to be available all week for the entire 5 weeks. I also agreed to pay for her gas in addition to wages. Things went well for a couple of weeks and then she began making excuses for arriving closer and closer to the time we needed to leave for Salem. The final week of treatment was really brutal, but this is when she simply didn't show up. I had to complete the course of treatment, so I drove to the appointments and collapsed after I got home.

To add insult to injury she didn't answer phone calls and kept my gas credit card for several months.

The combination of my pre-existing disability and the after-effects of the cancer treatment left me unable to drive, with a much-increased need for assistance in order to live independently. Finding a full-time caregiver proved much more difficult than locating a temporary driver and there were even fewer resources available.

Finally the man who had worked doing the outside chores I couldn't manage suggested that I talk with his youngest daughter. She had worked at a nursing home until she began caring for her mother, who suffered from Alzheimer's. Her mother had died a few weeks earlier, leaving her unemployed. This has worked wonderfully for the past 4 ½ years. Her prior experience gave her all the skills necessary to help me recover from my cancer treatment and 3 additional surgeries. I have one more surgery scheduled on March 18 that will hopefully allow me to once again live independently.

Despite the success of my care, there is a downside. I receive a PERS pension, as well as my Social Security benefit check. I also had about \$80,000 in a deferred compensation account accumulated during my career with the State. I am now financing my care with a credit card and praying that the upcoming surgery is successful.

This was not my only experience trying to locate a caregiver. I also tried to locate help for my 2 remaining maternal aunts.

The eldest of the two began having small strokes that not only interfered with swallowing, but also resulted in a series of falls. After her driver's license was taken away, she finally had to admit that she needed help. Luckily she did have resources that gave her options that are all too often lacking among the elderly.

She did locate a candidate who proceeded to help herself to my aunt's possessions. Failing to find a suitable candidate she decided to sell her home and move to adult foster care. Although this was her decision, she simply stopped trying. She refused physical therapy, and thus lost mobility and ended up wheelchair bound with fixed contractures of her legs. She stopped attending church, discouraged old friends from visiting and turned down invitations to visit them. She died 2 years ago.

My other aunt, the baby of the family, developed a severe, life-threatening illness. She desperately needed help with housework, and although she had a dependable vehicle, she was frequently unable to drive. Although Salem's transit system could have helped, she wasn't comfortable accessing the help she needed in order to use it effectively.

Unlike her older sister, she lived on very little. She worked in the Oregon Correction System until she retired and had earned a decent pension. But, she had withdrawn her half and entrusted it to a well-known investment company. Her money was invested in high risk stocks and she lost 60% of it in the 2000 stock market crash. This severely limited options, as she made

“too much money” to qualify for any help, but not enough to afford full-time care. That is, if there had actually been any help to access.

Both my caregiver and I tried everything, everywhere in Salem. Unfortunately she continued to go downhill and I can't help but think that her life could have at least been less anxious had she not had to worry about her situation. She died 3 years ago.

There simply is no central place to go to locate caregivers, let alone a way to vet candidates. Because of these experiences I support SB 1542. It would increase independence, safety and peace-of-mind for aging Oregonians. Also disabled citizens like me would be able to hire a quality in-home care worker, who has passed a background check and received training.

I respectfully urge your support of SB 1542.