

February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015

Ways and Means Committee  
State Capitol  
900 Court St. NE, S-205  
Salem, Oregon 97301

To Co-Chair Bates, Co-Chair Nathanson and the Committee members:

Why am I a Direct Support Professional? I love making the difference in someone's life that would not otherwise be made. All it takes is one person, one moment, one opportunity to change someone forever. I am successful at providing necessary opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to live, laugh, and work in their communities.

When I became a DSP, I made a personal commitment to give my every ounce of effort and do the right thing, always. In the beginning I knew there would be times I didn't know what to do, times I would have no idea what to say. I knew there would be trainings to help me with medications, paperwork and relationships. I thought I knew what my title meant as a Direct Support Professional. Now, almost 12 years later, I can honestly say I had no idea what I was getting into. It is nearly impossible to prepare a person to be a DSP. Rather, I feel you must find a person who is resilient enough to build the skills a DSP needs, and selfless enough to do it for nearly minimum wage.

Speaking for myself, I am a DSP because I have a sister with a disability. I understand firsthand how one single person can motivate one to greatness or break a person's entire being. I am great at what I do because I will never give up. I am skilled because without the resources, knowledge or credentials to get something completed, I will find a way to get it done. These are lives that we as a community are responsible for. Our brothers and sisters, our nieces and nephews, our children are in need. Every person has someone close to them that needs extra support with life. We cannot give up, we cannot stop striving for them to achieve great lives. Do you just sit, content, idle in life? No, you get out there, try new things, fail, build relationships, create spontaneity and live! The people I support deserve all the same greatness in their lives. We are dedicated to being that instrument, whatever it might look like, so that everyone can experience an awesome life.

I am so thankful for the experiences I have shared with the people I support. I can honestly say, I LOVE my job. The things I have learned in the past years could not be provided in any other environment, in any other format. I have acquired skills similar to those of a nurse, a counselor, a physical therapist, and a police officer. What I have grown to understand about body language, communication, human nature, and being person centered is incomparable to any other organized training. Like many of my fellow DSP's, I struggle to live with the current DSP



wages. I work for a nonprofit because they focus on the happiness of the people they support. I work for an agency that has the same beliefs, the same motivations that I do. Does that make my job any less valuable than people doing the same work through the state or a brokerage? Why is a non-profit given fewer resources to provide the same care? I have worked for the same agency for almost 12 years and I have seen them struggle to retain employees. It is not because of the work we do, it is not because of the difficult people, it's because people are looking for a sustainable career. I am embarrassed to say what the average DSP makes. I am ashamed that my commitment, my effort, my sacrifice is not worth enough to get a home loan for over 120k, even though my credit score is nearly 800. I have worked long and hard, the current wages wouldn't be enough to keep me if I didn't make a personal promise.

The biggest issue we face as a workforce is turnover. How are we to create stabilization and a clear path to greatness when we can't even get fully staffed? I have worked in homes where we have had the same open shifts for over a year. The burden it puts on DSP's, the supervisors, and the people living in the home is immeasurable. Often, it is more than one shift open per home resulting in upwards of 100 hours per week that we need to cover. This is not a production line that slows down, these are people that need our support to eat, drink, live, and be safe! We end up working endlessly, tirelessly, constantly. And frankly, we need the money. We need that couple hundred dollars extra to finally get our cars fixed, our children's school clothes, an opportunity to go to the doctor. Being paid near minimum wage creates a revolving struggle to keep our heads above water. It is nearly impossible to get the level of commitment needed from people to become successful with the current wages. The wage does not attract a trained, able bodied, resilient workforce. It attracts entry level applicants, people that have never had a job. People that want to quit as soon as they get hired. We need to offer competitive wages so that we can recruit and retain a strong workforce. DSP's never quit looking for a job, not because we don't like what we are doing, but because we are always struggling to live with the wages we receive.

The homes people live in now are incomparable to the institutional environments that have been our past. People that were once aggressive and segregated are now attending neighborhood block parties and picking out what color coordination they would like for their homes. Just as nurses, doctors, and police officers are absolutely necessary, so are Direct Support Professionals. We are supporting young adults that will learn and thrive in their homes, at their jobs, and within their neighborhoods. We are supporting people that would otherwise be in jail, nursing homes, crisis placements, or on the streets. Whether a person needs support during their moments of intimate care or because they are being physically aggressive, I am there. Not only am I there, I am confident and prepared to strategically handle whatever situation is at hand. With our goal to build positive relationships with the community, DSP's create another resolution to situations that would otherwise be handled by emergency services.

Direct Support Professionals are irreplaceable in a person's life and in our system of health care. Without DSP's and residential providers, our other services would be completely overwhelmed. With a highly skilled DSP, a person can go from needing 30 pills a day, two staff-twenty four hours a day, in the hospital at least 3 times a week, physically aggressive 5-30 times



a day, to a completely different man. A man who communicates using sign language instead of physical aggression. A man who works five days a week and receives a paycheck. A man who no longer takes medication to manage his behaviors. A man who takes walks, picks flowers, and plays catch. A man who has built great relationships where he is loved, respected, and needed. In this situation, everyone wins.

Thank you for your time and consideration on this topic. Please recognize that the quality of a person's life is directly correlated to the quality of the Direct Support Professionals, which also results in the amount of funding a person needs. The happier a person is, the fewer struggles they will have. I will leave you with one more story to touch on the work we do.

Respectfully,

Maren Gibson, DSP-R



## Sarah's Story

I am supporting a young woman who wants to move out, get married and have a career. She begs to be like her sisters, to be "normal". A wonderful woman who has shoulder length sandy hair, beautiful blue eyes, and friendly freckles across her nose and cheeks. She is shy, loving, and aching to get through every moment peacefully. What she experienced every day, I never imagined possible. She had sought care and stabilization from numerous different institutions, psych placements, hospitals, and research centers. All of which refused to treat her or were unsuccessful in supporting her.

When she moved to PCL she had just come across the country with her family, desperate for a placement that could help her. She was uncontrollably violent from extremely horrific hallucinations of dead children that she experienced constantly. Her eyes and head were badly deformed from the years she had spent abusing herself. She was severely depressed, refusing to eat, drink, or speak to anyone. She was malnourished and had wounds all over her body. She was 19 years old.

There I was, 24 years old, no formal mental health training. Only a deep desire to help her, a personal commitment to be there for her, and a promise to do it with care and kindness. I read all the papers that accompanied her and I still had no idea where to start. She was aggressive or non responsive to every attempt we made. We, as DSP, were out of ideas. Our formal training doesn't prepare us for every situation, and surely not this situation. All we knew, is that we were committed to figuring out what she needed.

Finally, she got out of bed. She came to her door and looked at me. Her hair was in her face, her shoulders hanging with such defeat, her clothing was dirty, stretched and torn. This was her first time up, her first effort, our first opportunity to see her standing. What do we do? Everything we had been trained to do was failing. As a DSP, there are times when we rely on training and there are times when we rely on our soul. This was a soul moment. As she walked slowly, silently, I asked to help her brush her hair. She stopped walking and looked from the floor to me as I approached. The entire house was watching us. I put my warm hand on her skinny, cold, bony shoulder and waited for her to hit me. I wanted her to know that I cared. That we cared. That we were here, no matter what she needed, no matter how long she needed it for. That every time she was scared, every time she was seeing dead children, we would be there to





protect her from herself. To assure her that this nightmare would end and a good life would be there waiting for her. In that hallway, instead of hitting me again, she spoke for the first time. She asked if we were different, she asked if we were there to help. We surely did not know it then, but this was the first step to a great life for her. There in her hallway with my hand on her shoulder, knees shaking, stomach tense, and voice quivering, her life changed. We made a promise, a difference, an impact on her. On me. This woman has taught me more than any one person in my entire life.

We spent the next years supporting her through changes in medicine, behavioral supports, finding correct mental health diagnosis and most importantly, finding value in herself. We built relationships with her that created trust, growth, and understanding. She went from hitting herself so hard she would be rendered unconscious to learning to communicate so we could support her through that moment to find peace. She built a relationship with her family that they couldn't achieve in the 19 years they tried. Her father cries when he speaks about the commitment our Direct Support Professionals made to his daughter during that time. I am extremely excited and proud to say that she is now working, has friends, and is looking for an apartment to move in to. Instead of throwing herself through walls or glass doors, she is talking to us. For the first time in her life, at the age of 25, she is no longer in crisis. That, by the standard of a Direct Support Professional, is a job well done.

