

Hi, my name is Andrea Hehn and I am a Direct Support Professional. My organization has higher standards than many group home organizations and attempts to provide clients with the best care possible, but it still struggles to attract and retain staff. High staff turnover and understaffing cause great stress for both clients and caregivers. I believe increasing wages and transparency would be the most effective strategy to combat this problem. How can the most expensive form of care in the state, also provide compromised supports and poverty wage jobs?

Why is high turnover a problem for clients? Imagine you live in a group home for a moment. Imagine you never or rarely get visitors, and that you spend all your evenings and holidays with your housemates and staff. Maybe you don't like your housemates, or maybe you do but they don't pay much attention to you. Maybe you're nonverbal and have a unique way of communicating. The only people who regularly express interest in you, who want to get to know you, who care about your well-being on a day-to-day basis, sometimes, are your staff. This certainly isn't the case for all clients, but it is the case for many. For many clients, a specific staff member is the most important person in the world. And then that staff member leaves. Imagine losing the most important person in your world.

I saw an example of this a couple months ago when I filled-in at a house that had recently lost most of its staff. When one or two people leave, remaining staff must pick up extra hours and cannot leave if the next person doesn't show up for their shift. The burden is huge, and what starts as a trickle can easily become a waterfall of quitting staff. One house, for example, only had two remaining staff, and one was a new hire. The clients were miserable. What was once a happy and calm house had turned to chaos, making it even more difficult to attract and keep new staff.

Most low-wage jobs are intended to be temporary or a stepping stone to a higher position, but not this one. The goal is for staff to make being a Direct Support Professional their career, and to stay with the same client or clients for decades. Every client deserves that kind of dedication and stability.

Unfortunately, most people cannot support themselves on these wages. I am fortunate enough to make a slightly higher than average wage as a DSP—due to the challenging behaviors of one of my clients—and I am personally able to make ends meet, plus save a little, working just 40 hours per week. But I have no student loans, no car payments, no debts, no illnesses, and no children. This is not the case for most of my coworkers. In order to pay their bills, most of my coworkers have to work overtime hours. I have one coworker who has two children and lives in Vancouver. He drives down to Beaverton or Milwaukee for a morning shift of 7-8 hours, and then drives to NE Portland for an evening 8-hour shift. He does this 6 days a week and rarely gets to spend time with his own children. The other day, this coworker was telling me how he had always wanted his children to know their father better than he knew his, but he didn't know how it was possible with how much he had to work.

I don't want that for my future. I want children someday, so I have been saving every penny towards education or classes for a new career, one that can support a family. It saddens me because I don't want to leave my clients, but I also don't want to make that type of personal sacrifice. I hope that someday, DSPs won't have to.