



Senator Steiner Hayward, Representative Rayfield and members of the committee, I am Margaret Theisen, Executive Director at Pearl Buck Center in Eugene. As I begin my fifth week in this position, I am reminded of the privilege it is to do Mission based work as a career. With 120 other employees at my agency, we are all drawn to this work of providing services and support to others partly because of the deeper meaning it allows in our lives. But the capacity for our direct support professionals to continue in this cause is being eroded by diminished resources.

Pearl Buck Center was founded in 1953, during an era when services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities were absent. From humble beginnings, our agency has grown to incorporate a preschool, day services, and an array of employment services which historically had an emphasis on sheltered work. With sheltered workshops quickly moving into the past, we are faced with a demanding transition.

In recent years, we have been required to expand hiring, train employees on new certification requirements, migrate the billing system to eXPRS, implement Employment First policies and accomplish all this without a COLA. Our expenses have included the ever-increasing costs for health insurance and attempts to keep up with minimum wage increases. We wholeheartedly believe in living wages and training and retaining our personnel. Unfortunately, we struggle with ensuring quality, consistent staff availability while the expectations upon them increase and the compensation to our agency does not.

During my second week at Pearl Buck Center while eating in the lunch room, one of our staff was given an envelope from our payroll department. When a coworker asked what it was, he responded, "I needed to get a draw to put gas in my car to get to work tomorrow." I paused with a heavy heart knowing how dedicated this young man is to our clients, and that he is not even making it from paycheck to paycheck. This is not what I want for him or anyone. But it is the reality of our resource allocation at this time. Supporting the policy option package for direct support professionals will not alleviate all of the challenges we face every day, but for thousands of our workforce statewide, it may move them closer to living from paycheck to paycheck.

We appreciate your consideration and thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee today.