

Chairs Nosse and Beyer, members of the committee,

For the record my name is Kathryn Eckert-Mason, and I am an SEIU 503 member. I am a Vocational Rehabilitation worker in the South Salem OVRS office. I love my job, and I have done this work for the past 20 years because of it resonates with me. I love the fact that through rehabilitation services we have the power to change peoples' lives by giving them employment.

There is no typical day for me. With the increased emphasis on youth transition services due to WIOA as well as my intense passion for transition, I spend about half of my time working in the field monitoring transition activities for youth who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing both at the Oregon School for the Deaf as well as in various local high schools. I work in a wide range of schools including schools in Independence, Cascade, Silverton, Mt Angel, Amity and several high schools within the Salem Keizer School District. When not meeting with students, I am working hard to collaborate our efforts with various education partners, representatives from Marion and Polk County Developmental Disability Services, and service vendors to develop seamless transition outcomes for students with hearing loss in our area.

On top of high school transition, I work hard to maintain a caseload of close to 130 active cases. I place a high value on training and have a good portion of individuals on the caseload in training towards marketable skills towards self-sustaining employment outcomes. It has been very gratifying once you been in the field for as long as I have, to know the numbers of persons that are out there in professional employment as a result of the services provided by Vocational Rehabilitation.

Finally, there is the caseload management / paperwork portion of the job. This portion has grown exponentially over time. It is now the largest part of the job. People tend to become VR Counselors because of their love for people and making a difference. Sadly, they find that over half the job is case notes, and case management duties, including some that are time sensitive and not people related. These include duties

such as eligibility and plan due dates, insuring that clients get timely services without delay etc. Within the course of my day, I need a good 4 to 5 hours in the day dedicated to paperwork and planning purposes. This leaves the average VR counselor struggling with working a longer day, trying to balance the need to have face to face contact with clients, participation in required mandatory meetings for the sake of collaboration and then the required policy driven mandates of the paperwork portions of the job. It generally is acknowledged that all, is not possible.

In my time with Vocational Rehabilitation, I have seen the stress level increase dramatically, and people who are good counselors, leave for employment elsewhere without the stress that this position entails given caseload size and the enormity of what needs to be done to manage the numbers. Some staff have more capacity to hold out for longer periods of time than others, but in the end, the result is the same. Even the best of us battle ongoing Compassion Fatigue and Burn Out. A lessened motivation to care and bringing about a decrease in quality services being provided as staff work hard for their own self-preservation. This is the consequence of long term under-staffing / under-resourcing and why we are in need of more resources and more manpower now.

If OVRs were funded at a level where there were manageable caseloads and people to equitably carry the load, it would greatly impact the quality of the services provided and those caring people who entered the field in order to make an impact in peoples' lives would stay. Our clients would get more of what they deserve. A counselor who is more fully present to their needs and better able to deliver services in a timely manner. Overall production in rehab numbers would increase and our ability to have positive impact in peoples; lives would be enhanced.

The Agency wants to add 79 positions over last biennium, 62 of those are to get Vocational Rehabilitation to 100% of the workload model for this biennium. This would be 45 counselors, 7 case assistants, and 10 branch managers. The Governor's budget supports this funding request. The work that my colleagues and I do is important to the people we serve, and it's a critical part of Oregon's social safety net. I am asking you to

do everything you can to ensure that we are able to continue to provide these services, and not make any further cuts that increase our workloads and hurt our consumers.

Thank you for your time, and for your commitment to this issue.

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