

Memo

To: Chair Williams and Members of the Committee
From: Joanne Fuhrman, Co-Director of Partnerships in Community Living, Inc.
Date: March 10, 2021
Subject: **Please Support HB2964 - Value the Work, Raise the Wage!**

My name is Joanne Fuhrman and I am the Co- Founder & Chief Executive Officer of Partnerships in Community Living, Inc. (PCL). PCL is a private, non-profit organization that has **partnered** with the State of Oregon for over 35 years to provide support at home, work, and in our communities to over 300 adults, children, and families who live and thrive with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities (I/DD). PCL provides these services in eight counties including Marion, Polk, Benton, Josephine, Jackson, Linn, Yamhill, and Lane. We employ over 500 Direct Support Professionals – known as DSPs. DSPs are essential in meeting our mission of, “Expanding the horizons and enhancing the quality of life of those we support.” DSPs are on the front line and are integral to the person-centered services that organizations like PCL provide. For too long this essential role has been undervalued and underpaid.

Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you about HB 2964 and the importance of valuing the work of DSPs across Oregon and raising their wage to an average of 150% of minimum wage. DSPs are much more than caregivers. They provide support in all aspects of a person’s life. They are not just there for the fun times or when they celebrate someone achieving a significant goal; they guide people through a complicated healthcare system, help people learn to manage themselves through anger and frustration, they are grief counselors when someone loses a family member or loved one, and so much more. They provide complicated, intimate personal care, and sadly, they may guide someone through their end of life. I started my career as a DSP. I know the joys and the struggles of this job. This is not minimum wage work. I gave my first testimony regarding the need for valuing the work and raising DSP wages in 1988 and 33 years later, I am still here continuing to ask for a long-term solution. Each year that goes by without addressing wage issues for the DSP workforce, the crisis gets worse and our provider system comes closer to collapsing. I have never seen it closer to the point of collapse as it is now.

As I look back on this year that included an ongoing pandemic, historic wildfires, and most recently an ice storm that included power outages that in some cases lasted up to a week, internet and cell services outages, I can attest to the fact that DSPs are absolutely essential.

This workforce has come to work, no matter the challenge, doing extremely important work that is also mentally, physically, and emotionally challenging while assuring the people we serve with I/DD have the help and support to stay healthy and safe. Despite PCL's commitment to fair, competitive DSP wages and the fact that we have passed every increase provided by past legislators directly to DSP wages, we still cannot keep up with the increased competition in the workforce. When local fast food restaurants are starting at \$15.00 to \$16.00 per hour, we simply cannot compete. We can not simply raise our "prices" to increase wages. We are partners in this with you and depend on your funding and investment in the services we provide. Together, we can show we value the work DSPs do for Oregonians every day. We can raise their wages.

Workforce shortages wreak havoc on the financial stability of the State's non-profit I/DD provider partners. Overtime costs, the constant cycle of recruitment, as well as hiring and training, drain scarce resources that are needed to provide quality services. DSP shortages mean DSPs, Managers, and Executive team members alike are working 60 to 80 hour work weeks, for weeks on end to make sure the people we serve get the support they need, are promised, and that they deserve. Currently, **PCL has 120 open DSP positions. This crisis has had a devastating effect on providers' long term financial stability, but of most concern to me is the effect this crisis has on the people we support; it is their quality of life, and potentially their health and safety, that is of most concern to all of us. We are not only obligated to be good stewards of the funds we receive, but we must be good stewards of the trust the people we support, their families, and communities extend to us to meet our mission. There is no doubt HB2964 will have a direct positive impact on the quality of support people with I/DD receive in Oregon.**

Investing in DSP wages is not only the right thing to do, but it is also an investment that will pay dividends in outcomes. A strong, well-trained DSP workforce will reduce overtime, reduce burnout leading to lower on-the-job accidents, and lower hiring and recruiting costs, just to name a few. All these cost reductions can be reinvested into wages, benefits, and training for DSP's which will, in turn, incentivize the Direct Support Professional role as a real career option. In this scenario, the system wins, DSPs win, and most importantly, Oregonians with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities win and are provided safe and quality supports that they desire and deserve.

Please support HB 2964.