



Partnerships in
Community
Living, Inc.

Testimony Resubmitted, 4/12/2021

To: Co-Chairs Lieber and Nosse and Members of the Committee
From: Dorothy Coughlin, Family Member of Person Supported by PCL
Date: April 13, 2021
Subject: SB 5529, HB 2964

My name is Dorothy Coughlin. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my concerns about an issue that impacts the lives of many of our most vulnerable Oregon citizens. For the first time in years of advocacy addressing this very issue, with the passage of HB2964 and SB5529, we may see Oregon step up at last to provide a just wage for Direct Support Professionals who daily support the lives of children and adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

I am very close to this issue as my sister Barbara, diagnosed with profound Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities has been served for the greater portion of her adult life by staff of Partnerships in Community living. I am compelled to advocate not only on behalf of my sister, but for all who live with IDD. I am recently retired in the field of Disability and am close to the issues that impact the lives of people with disability, their families, and their care providers in Oregon.

One of the positive outcomes of the Covid 19 pandemic is that we have come to recognize and gain greater appreciation for those people in our community who provide essential services. The majority of these people we count on, work for salaries at or just above minimum wage. Direct Support Professionals who provide for the care needs of our family members with significant disability are the essential workers we count on to insure the health, safety, and well-being of our sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, grandchildren, friends with significant support needs. They are counted among those whose critical work for years has been compensated with salaries at or just above minimum wage.

Imagine being paid slightly above minimum wage to carry the responsibility of daily insuring the health and safety and sense of community and home for multiple people with challenges in mobility, communication, complex health needs - people who depend on you to insure each day they receive support with dressing, toileting, nutritious meal preparation; and for some, eating assistance to prevent aspiration, for some tube feeding; managing multiple medications, Dr.'s appointments, shopping, daily activities to develop skills, insuring physical exercise, following multiple risk protocols unique to each person served, monitoring and recording important data for each individual, interpreting verbal and non-verbal communication, responsibility for attending staff meetings and on-going training, working collaboratively with other care providers in the home, keeping a clean and homey environment, daily laundry, grocery shopping, clothes

shopping for household, problem solving, crisis intervention, preparing for holidays and birthdays, communication with family, professionals. This is not a complete list. Add to this, the responsibility to follow all safety protocols for Covid 19 to protect themselves and those in their care. Imagine anyone of us carrying this level of responsibility on a just-above minimum wage salary. Imagine in addition, trying to support your family on this salary.

For years, this reality of absolutely essential work of DSPs not being compensated commensurate to the level of responsibility has resulted in our vulnerable Oregonians with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities exposed to risks to their health, safety, and well-being. Agencies such as PCL commit to responsible care for hundreds of Oregon's most vulnerable children and adults. Hiring is at crisis level. It is difficult to recruit and retain competent, mature, dedicated care providers. DSP vacancies exist resulting in present staff needing to take on extra shifts. When basic requirements for work in a 24-hour residential setting includes "be 18 years of age or older", the potential work force able to consider a minimum wage job are less mature, inexperienced employees carrying critical responsibilities which is in itself potential risk. Thankfully, there are some dedicated adults whose commitment to care and competency provide quality care. But the challenge of retention is high for these DSPs who cannot survive on present wage standards. Less evident, but sadly true, low wage can translate into less regard for the position of Direct Support Professional – demoralizing for those whose dedicated service ensures daily quality care for those they serve. "The Case for Inclusion 2020" cites the average turnover rate nationwide of DSPs is 43.8. I have seen first hand the risks and outcomes of the DSP workforce crisis in my sister's life. It takes a period of time for new staff to develop a relationship with those in their care. Not only learning the basics of care, individualized for each person cared for, a new DSP needs to develop a trusting relationship with each person in their care. That takes time. In my sister's household, long term staff (more than a year) with trusting relationships with the household, have left and new staff are providing care. This is so disruptive to my sister and her household for whom routine and predictability are so important along with care provided by people who know them, appreciate what works best for them in their care needs; who can interpret their verbal and non-verbal communication, who know the little things that make a difference in creating a healthy, safe, caring environment that people call home and have possibility to grow and thrive as persons.

I am grateful for those leaders in our Oregon Legislature who generated HB2964 and SB5529. Establishing a just wage for Direct Support Professionals is a sign of recognition of our responsibility to ensure quality care for people in Oregon with Intellectual and Developmental Disability. I am hopeful that the passage of HB2964 and SB5529 will lead us into a future with Oregon being able to take pride and demonstrate our State's leadership in valuing care of our most vulnerable citizens and acknowledgement of the significant contribution of DSPs in supporting the lives of those entrusted to their care.