

Judith Voss, M.A., D.Ed.
655 Goodpasture Island Rd., Apt. #69
Eugene, OR 97401
judithvoss@comcast.net
541-4554-3337

Co-Chair Lieber, Co-Chair Nosse, and members of the committee,

As you consider the ODDS budget for county Developmental Disabilities Programs, I am writing this letter of testimony to the crucial importance of case managers and the oversight they provide on behalf of their caseloads. Without case managers so many individuals' crucial support needs simply would fall through the cracks, especially those in residential services.

My daughter has been in residential services for the past twenty years. The past ten of those years she has lived in a group home. We have been blessed that in two decades she has only had three case managers. The dedication and commitment of those people has been exemplary.

On the other hand, the turnover of staff in my daughter's home has been astronomical, as it is in all group homes. Recently I tried to recall the personnel who had come and gone in the past eight years, and I stopped counting at sixty-eight. Because of the lack of a living wage recruitment is abysmal. Standards for hiring are practically non-existent. Retention of quality staff is virtually impossible. This is a widely systemic problem and on every level the quality of life and care of those served suffers as a result.

Low DSP wages is the single root cause of substandard care that is rampant in the group home system. I have known DSPs who literally had to get food boxes from local charities just to feed their families. If legislators truly want to devise a budget that actually makes sense, it must start there. Fixing that one essential fatal flaw of pathetic DSP wages would save enormous amounts of money in every other aspect of the service system, including in the case management sector. The reality is that if my daughter were receiving consistently proper care, I would not need to rely so heavily on a case manager.

But since that is not the case, I am exceedingly grateful that my daughter has the very best case manager anyone could have. She is a true Godsend, and the only ally I have in my struggle as a parent/guardian to ensure my daughter has safe, enriched care. Her case manager could not be more compassionate, responsive, competent, and effective in acting as a liaison between me and the group home, and in intervening to resolve issues. Above all, she deeply cares about the fate of my daughter, and is the only person I know who would continue to advocate for my daughter when I die. There absolutely is no greater testament than that to the importance of her role.

I am highly educated and have an eclectic professional background in the field, including a Doctorate of Education in Developmental Disabilities. I have been an ardent advocate for my daughter her entire life in every realm and arena. Even with my extensive knowledge and experience my daughter's health, safety, and quality of life are often at risk due to the turnover rate previously mentioned. Even with my continual oversight and strong presence things frequently go wrong, sometimes with very serious consequences. The residential system is not used to having involved parents/guardians, and because I pay attention, often I am not a welcome presence.

I cannot even begin to imagine what it would be like for less savvy parents to be without a case manager to provide oversight. The snowball effect of medical and behavioral crises, as well as the incidents of abuse of every kind, undoubtedly would increase exponentially, which not only would be a detriment to vulnerable people, but also would fiscally tax the system to an even greater degree.

As it is, services are crisis driven which incurs far greater cost than being proactively, prevention focused. Since adequate funding is not provided at the source of systemic dysfunction, supporting and maintaining the stability of case managers is paramount in protecting people's very lives. The vast majority of individuals who live in group homes do not have any relative or friend to watch over them. Please pause for a moment to consider how deeply tragic that is, most especially for all those who cannot speak for themselves, and are medically and/or behaviorally fragile, which comprises most people in such settings. Case managers are the ones who fill that void, and who champion what is best for their clients. I have met and known many case managers and every single one of them has had a huge heart for those they serve.

In the past case managers were able to attend doctors' appointments, and celebrations of their clients, and gotten to know families, and been much more physically present than they are in today's system where they are inundated and overwhelmed by untenable case loads and ridiculously massive amounts of paperwork. I have the utmost regard for anyone who can manage to stick it out under such conditions, and who still, somehow, manages to do a good job.

From my perspective, I can assure you that case managers are absolutely vital in a system that otherwise would leave our most vulnerable citizens, and their struggling families, with no safety net, guidance, or support. Their function is foundational to holding agencies accountable that otherwise might be self-serving.

Good people with best intentions are everywhere. It is the system, not the individuals who work within them, that are problematic. At the same time, those who experience intellectual and developmental disabilities generally fare better than those who have mental illness. The lack of services across the board in that sector is beyond shameful. But that is the subject for another letter.

Thank you so much for the important work you do on behalf of your constituents and stakeholders to provide equitable resources within the limitations you must grapple with. I very much appreciate you taking my humble testimony into consideration, and for recognizing the crucial, multidimensional role and absolute importance of case managers.

Respectfully Yours,

Judith Voss
Mother, Legal Guardian, & Life Enrichment Specialist