

To the Oregon Senate Human Services Committee:

My name is Klari Cannard. I live with my husband and our autistic son, James, in Portland.

When my son was 18 months old, he was identified as possibly autistic. We entered the Early Intervention program and he qualified for services. We then got on the waiting list for a medical diagnosis through Providence. Just before his 2nd birthday, the world began to shut down due to the pandemic. Until that point, I worked nights and my husband worked days, as we could not afford childcare. When the pandemic shut down my office, and I was receiving unemployment, I was able to be home with James and devote all of my time to him. In November of 2020, when he was 2.5 years old, we were able to get his diagnosis of Level 3 autism. According to the assessment, he was determined to be at the level of a 4 month old in socialization, a 9 month old in communication and a 13 month old in daily living skills.

The following year when he was 3.5, at his followup visit, they found he had progressed 18 months of development in some areas in the span of a year. He was not progressing at the expected rate when both of his parents were forced to work outside of the home, but with his mother home, he made tremendous progress to catch up to his peers.

He's now almost five years old. I have been unable to return to work because childcare is hard to find, and we still could not afford it, obstacles that are even higher because he is special needs. He is now communicating, and attempting a lot of speech, but even with speech therapy, I am his interpreter, as his speech is still very difficult to understand. He still is behind his peers and needs more help. He still needs a great deal of regulation and consistency. But he is progressing and his providers are very optimistic.

My mother in law passed away in 2018. My mother passed in February of 2020. My father in law moved out of the city, and my own father has to work to afford to live. Everyone else in our lives works. We have almost no support network.

As it stands now, we aren't making it financially. Unemployment extensions ended in September of 2021. I cashed out my meager 401k at that time. We have cut everything. My husband's salary is not a living wage for a family of three with one working adult, according to economists, and our experience reflects that. Yet we make just over the threshold for programs like SNAP. We don't qualify for enough hours to be able to be a paid parent caregiver under the current emergency provisions, but if I could be paid for the hours we do get, it would go a long way towards keeping us afloat.

Allowing me to be my son's paid caregiver would give us more financial stability, while also giving my son the best chance to progress and catch up to his peers. Paying a stranger who may come or go, who will need training and to get to know my son and his needs, as well as learn to interpret his language, is not in my son's and my family's best interest, even IF there was a person available to take the role. Which is an issue with

the shortage of caregivers. And it still would not allow me to work an outside job since caregiver hours are not allowed to be during the parent's working hours.

The current system is based on the assertion that parents should not be paid to raise their kids. This assertion completely ignores the fact that we aren't just parents. Being a parent to a special needs child is far more than standard parenting, and takes a huge toll on families. Being a 24/7 caregiver actually takes years off of your life. When I planned to be a parent, I didn't expect to be dealing with developmental issues that keep a parent doing the level of caregiving of an infant into the toddler years and up. This is not just parenting. It is caregiving. And we should be paid for the work we are already doing, that already works, that is best for our children.

I'm a sixth generation Oregonian. I have always been proud of our state and the innovations our legislature and citizens have developed, some of them making us first in the country. I am extremely frustrated we are not leading the way on paid parent caregivers. Oregonians can do better and must do better. Pay parent caregivers. Without undue restrictions. Please pass Senate Bill 646.