

February 10, 2023

Dear Early Childhood and Human Services Committee Hearing,

HIGH IMPORTANCE! Please Support HB2457

My name is Reuben Fellman. I work as a DSP (Direct Support Professional) for Living Opportunities in Jackson County. As a person who experiences both cognitive and physical disabilities, I take great pride in not only having a job, but in doing work that makes a meaningful difference for my community. I know so many people who hate their jobs and I feel I am uniquely lucky in finding employment that I genuinely look forward to doing every day. As a queer and disabled activist I am often overwhelmed by all of the ways in which our world is unjust and inaccessible, but I am able to find some semblance of peace through my work because I know that I can accomplish much more progress on an individual scale by putting an enormous effort into a single issue rather than trying to worry about every problem that threatens the vastness of human wellbeing. I support people with IDD to take medications, cook meals, go grocery shopping, and to set their own goals and achieve them, as well as providing support for maintaining personal hygiene, housekeeping, managing money, behavioral, emotional, & mental health support, and critical medical care.

These services are there to protect some of the most vulnerable Oregonians. These services are critical in compensating for the unequal series of challenges that the people in my community face.

I am writing to express great concern over the 2023-25 budget.

I love my job but my paycheck is not enough to cover the exorbitant medical expenses that life as a person with multiple disabilities and chronic illness creates. I think that the profound sense of empathy that comes from the shared experience of navigating an ableist world as a disabled individual is one of the things that makes me a good DSP. If we agree that the supports we offer are stronger when the provider has personal experiences with the consequences of systemic and direct ableism, then it makes sense that employing more disabled staff will foster a stronger community and create better systems of support for folks with IDD. But how are we expected to hire and keep staff who are uniquely experienced with disability if our paychecks are not even enough to afford the intensive healthcare that existing as a disabled person requires? Housing that is compatible with my mobility aids is dramatically more expensive than non-ADA compliant housing. The cost of living has sky-rocketed and continues to do so despite being completely uncoupled from the rate at which working class wages increase. It takes rigorous (and expensive) mental healthcare to maintain stability under the pressures of intersecting queerness, disability, a chaotic job, and financial insecurity. On a more personal note, my four year anniversary is next month but I am not sure I can afford to take time off to observe that milestone with my partner because of steep medical bills and missed work days associated with my disability. Caregivers are notoriously uncared for despite the redundantly repeated adage that "you can't care for others unless you care for yourself first." Please help me and my coworkers care for ourselves with your support for HB2457 so that we do not have to continue making difficult personal choices between housing, healthcare, and healthy food. I am very dedicated to this job but we are all on the brink of burnout and I fear that I cannot continue this

work unless I am compensated for my high-level skills and for the sacrificed rest that this field of work demands.

- DSP vacancy rate of 23% Turnover is extremely high and contributes to a dramatic reduction in the quality of care we are able to provide, as well as creating an endless cycle of re-traumatization for the people we support because from their perspective, it is not an issue of staff having to leave this field of work to prioritize their survival- it just feels like abandonment.
- Per a recent ORA survey, 85% of providers are no longer accepting referrals to serve new people and 86% have reduced capacity or closed services and anticipate closing additional services.
- DSP wages rose significantly after you agreed to fund the current rate model last session. Thank you for this investment. It has directly contributed to what is hopefully an exponential rate of improvement in disability services, both for those who receive and provide them.
- The pandemic and changing workforce has continued to erode our progress on wages. Even though organizations like Living Opportunities are consistently paying wages above the amount that is funded, they are still struggling to hire and retain employees. Despite paying us more than the minimum wage we still lack a budget sufficient to meet our basic needs and living expenses.

Please Support HB2457. Your support for this crucial increase in funding for disability services translates directly to less staff turnover and better supports. Your support for HB2457 means I get to keep doing valuable work to serve my community.

THANK YOU!

Reuben Fellman

Disability Support Provider and Supported Living Professional with Living Opportunities in Jackson county, OR