

Chairpersons and esteemed members of the Committee, my name is Candice Zalenski and I was a direct support professional for over ten years in St Helens. I suffered permanent physical damage at the hands of a person I supported, a harsh reality of this field. I was forced to make a career change, but this gave me one gift, the time to be here to speak LOUD and CLEARLY about the plight of the amazing workforce who supports people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities and to encourage you to generously fund HB 2457.

My peers are living a nightmare, in that they are mostly invisible and unknown to YOU, the very people who decide how well they will be compensated for the professional services they render to the most vulnerable constituents in your districts. Well over 16,000 of us work under incredibly stressful, sometimes hazardous conditions. We PERSONALLY show up through nights, holidays, storms, disasters and... yes, pandemics, so that the people we serve are never left alone.

We are chronically short staffed, burned out and just plain exhausted. Yet, regularly, we are forced to take precious time to fight ...once again... for a dignified, deserving wage. Our highly skilled services significantly SAVE taxpayers money by keeping people out of hospitals, therapy, jail, and even funeral homes...yet we are paid so little that a large portion of us have to take on side work and rely on government services just to keep from being homeless and hungry.

Every year, more people need the expertise of this essential workforce as their personal coaches, teachers, guides, dieticians, counselors, health aides and other functions... but fewer people are finding reasons to join our ranks. Though it is fulfilling work to many, it simply does not pay enough to support a living.

Before funding new programs and answering to the loudest voices, remember this dedicated and compassionate group and the people in their care... who deserve better. I trust you will do the right thing and correct this crisis.

