

Submitter: Christopher Merritt  
On Behalf Of: SB 538  
Committee: Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee On Human Services  
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB5547

My name is Christopher Merritt. I am a father of two children in the CIIS program for Intensive Behavior, and both are on the CEN waitlist. Due to their high needs, my wife is their primary caregiver, and the time involved caring for them and then recovering from the high stress and the injuries which are sometimes sustained make it impossible for her to seek employment. We have one paid caregiver, her brother, who lives with us. Between the two children, we have more hours of paid care than he can use, but despite that we have been unable to find other caregivers. Many brokerages cannot support children with the high behavioral needs that ours have. I know there are many parents throughout the state dealing with similar issues, and many with children dealing with severe medical disabilities that require special care that is not easily found.

SB 538 is critical for these families. We manage to scrape by on my income, but our family would have a much higher quality of life with two incomes. My wife previously worked as a caregiver for adults with developmental disabilities and graduated college with a degree in psychology, both of which have proven very relevant with our children's diagnoses and behaviors. She is burdened with student loan debt that she is unable to pay back effectively because she does not have the time to be employed: caring for our children is her full time job. Not providing any income has a toll on her mental and emotional health, despite being an indispensable element of our household. And I know this is true for the hundreds of other families with children in the CEN program. Single parents who have to struggle to make ends meet while doing the best they can for their child. Families stressing over finances because they only have the one income. SB 538 would resolve these issues.

And it does not change the state's fiscal responsibilities. Care hours are already allotted to these children. If there was not such a shortage of support workers in the state, these hours would be being used each month, requiring payment from the state. All this bill does is widen the pool of caregivers to include parents. Parents who know their children better than anybody else. Parents who are already providing the necessary care to their children.

Due to the temporary allowance during the COVID-19 emergency, we know this works! Parents were allowed to be paid caregivers and this greatly improved the well-being of the families affected. If it could be done then, it can be done now.

Please, hundreds of families across the state need this support. Fund SB 538 and

ensure that these families get the help they need, when so much is already demanded of them.

Thank you.

Christopher Merritt