

Chairwoman Rotundo, Chairwoman Sachs, Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs, Chairman Baldacci, Chairwoman Meyer, and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services,

My name is Kathy Rickards and I live in Brunswick, Maine. I am the parent of a 42-year-old man with medical, intellectual, and mental health disabilities that have significantly impacted his life circumstances. My purpose in testifying today is to implore you to act decisively in both increasing funding for DSP's, and eliminating the interminable waitlists, particularly the all-important Section 21 waitlist.

For 39 years, in great part to a stellar team of individuals advocating for my son, I had the faith that we were always moving in a direction that supported my son to live a safe and personally fulfilling life in his home community. He is the lucky recipient of Section 21 Waiver Services and in March of 2020, he was able to move into an age in place group home with 5 life-long friends, that we all assumed would be his forever home. I have lost faith in the last 3 years. As these committees are fully aware, over 70 group have closed, in part due to insufficient rate reimbursement. Housing stability is a universal need, and this legislature is grappling with this issue, particularly where it concerns New Mainers. The need for trusted relationships and reliable routines is critical to the daily functioning of my son and many others with severe disabilities. For the residents of those 70 group homes, their lives were completely upended. The false choice seemed to be, move back to their family home to aging parents who can no longer provide the intensive 24 hour a day care required, or move to any open bed. DHHS often talks about the importance of natural supports, and I agree. Imagine if your loved one who cannot communicate effectively has a medical crisis, and is now housed hours away. All natural supports are gone. The thought is terrifying. Families find themselves in the unimaginable position of taking their loved ones home until they themselves die, and then knowing that their loved one will then be placed in any open bed. The Long-Term Care Commission, as well as the 130th Legislature took initial steps to mitigate the long-term care workforce crisis, but the events of the last few years have clearly shown that 125% of minimum wage is not enough to meet the current need for highly skilled DSP's who hold our family member's lives in their hands. Medicaid law imposes the requirement that providers are reimbursed according to consistent methodologies with rate sufficient to ensure access to efficient and quality services. We are not meeting this requirement and must now stop the unimaginable toll on the lives of the disability community.

I would ask that you study the issues around the section 21 waitlist on which over 2000 Maine citizens languish and advocate for increasing the 3 million funding that only addresses Maine citizens with disabilities who are being abused, neglected, or exploited (Priority 1). Surely Priority 2 citizens who are risk for abuse, neglect, or exploitation are deserving of our immediate attention and funding, at the very least.

The issues are complex and the competition for funds is never ending. However, we must do the right thing for our Maine neighbors with disabilities to allow them to live in their communities and participate in their fullest life. Please let me know if I can be of any assistance as we work together to achieve this goal.

Kathy T. Rickards