

Traci O'Neill
GRAY
LD 2067

TO: Senator Tipping, Representative Mastraccio, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor

DATE: January 20, 2026

To the members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and support for this essential legislation. I appear before you today not only as a dedicated public servant but as an experienced professional who has committed over three decades to the care and safety of our state's most vulnerable citizens.

My name is Traci O'Neill, and I am a Community Response Worker for Disability Services Crisis Prevention and Intervention Services. My career in mental health services for adults with developmental disabilities began in 1988 at the Pineland Center, where I served until its closure. I then transitioned to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Developmental Services Crisis Team. I have accumulated 35 years of continuous service in this critical field, which now includes supporting individuals with co-occurring brain injuries.

In 2021, our job classification was formally changed to Community Response Worker. Despite the demanding nature of our duties, this classification currently offers no structured pathways for career advancement or long-term retention incentives.

Our role as essential personnel mandates rigorous schedules, including mandatory 12- and 16-hour shifts, working weekends, holidays, and overnight coverage. This work requires substantial travel, often necessitated by emergency response protocols during all hours and challenging weather conditions.

A critical factor impacting our workforce is age. I can attest that the physical and mental demands of this occupation becomes increasingly difficult for staff, particularly those serving past the age of 55.

We work with people daily that can be verbally and physically assaultive. Unlike staff positions within the state psychiatric centers or correctional facilities, our roles typically lack the benefit of multi-person support teams. We often staff residential settings—such as a 2-bed crisis home—with a single worker 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The resulting staffing ratio (one staff to two residents) constitutes a skeleton crew model. Response time to secure backup during a crisis is not quick. Frequently resulting in injury before assistance arrives.

The emotional toll stemming from years of verbal and physical aggression is significant. Furthermore, our responsibilities include the mandated reporting of grave allegations, including sexual assault, animal abuse, child abuse, and neglect. The graphic details and intensity of these threats can be traumatic and create acute occupational stress, worry, and anxiety that persist long after the shift ends, impacting our personal lives and the well-being of our families. I have personally received threats against my life and the lives of my family members on multiple occasions. We all try our best to keep everyone safe and to support each other but at the end of the day the stress, worry and anxiety go home with us, impacting every part of our lives and the lives of our family.

I have been physically assaulted so many times I cannot keep track. I have been hit, kicked, bit, had my hair pulled, spit on, and objects thrown at me. I have had my shirt ripped off and been physically groped. I have been hit while driving in the car making me go off the road. I have been involved in lengthy physical restraints, resulting in injury in the effort to maintain the safety of the individual and myself. As we age the risk of serious injury and health issues greatly increases in this highly physical and emotionally demanding occupation.

With that being said, I remain committed to providing compassionate and dedicated service despite the risks. However, the current structure fails to adequately recognize the hazards and sacrifices required of this essential workforce.

I respectfully urge the Committee to support this critical legislation, which offers a

necessary recognition and retention tool by providing an appropriate retirement option for essential workers over the age of 55 with 25 years of service.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and thoughtful review of this critical matter.

Traci O'Neill

Community Response Worker 35 Years of Service