

**Testimony of Debbie Dionne**  
Parent and Guardian  
Founding Board member of Community Connect Maine  
Board Member of Independence Association

*Neither for Nor Against*

*LD 2122, An Act of Making Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and Changing Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government show the Fiscal Years Ending June 30, 2026 and June 30, 2027*

**Joint Standing Committees on Appropriations and Financial Affairs & Health and Human Services  
February 17, 2026**

My name is Debbie Dionne and I live in Topsham. After retiring in 2009 from a 35-year career as a teacher at Brunswick Junior High School, I became a full time, volunteer, disability advocate.

Since then, I have submitted testimony every legislative session urging this body to ensure that direct care workers are paid wages that truly reflect the depth of their professional responsibilities. These professionals provide complex, hands-on care to children and adults with disabilities and to our elderly citizens. They administer medications, manage medical and behavioral needs, assist with all activities of daily living, and quite literally safeguard lives. The level of skill, accountability, and emotional investment required of them is significant.

Some years we have made progress. Many years we have not. The reality remains: direct care workers in Maine are still grossly underpaid. Too many must work multiple jobs or excessive overtime just to support their own families. That is not sustainable for them, and it is not safe for the vulnerable people who depend on a stable, well-supported workforce. Meanwhile, Maine continues to face a severe health care workforce crisis, with alarming vacancy rates and more than 100 residential homes closed due to staffing shortages directly tied to insufficient reimbursement rates.

I am also the mother and guardian of Kate, a 46-year-old woman with cerebral palsy, an intellectual disability, and a seizure disorder. My husband and I are now facing life-changing medical challenges of our own, which have significantly increased my responsibilities at home and as a caregiver.

Thankfully, Kate has lived in a Waiver 21 group home for the past 24 years. She depends on the Direct Support Professionals in her home to support her most personal and complex needs 24 hours a day. Kate and her five housemates thrive on *consistency* and the *deep trust* they build with their staff. When a DSP leaves, it is not simply a staffing change — it is a devastating loss.

Each departure means trust must be rebuilt and communication reestablished. For my daughter and many others like her, this disruption can quickly become a crisis. Kate is nonverbal and communicates in alternative ways. When she is not understood, the consequences can be

serious — refusal to eat or drink, withdrawal, self-injury, behavioral outbursts, or signs of acute depression. These are not “behavior problems.” They are expressions of fear, confusion, and loss that Kate has unfortunately experienced.

We must retain the highly trained, experienced, compassionate DSPs who choose to do this demanding work.

Since the COLA was established in 2022 and fully funded in FY23 and FY24, it has been a critical lifeline in stabilizing services across Maine. Because of persistent advocacy from providers, workers, people receiving services, and family members like me, *lawmakers acted last year to restore partial COLA funding in the budget. For that, I am sincerely grateful.*

But a Cost-of-Living Adjustment written into statute should not be optional. When it is omitted from the supplemental budget for two consecutive years, it undermines the very stability it was designed to protect.

These workers are not asking for something new. They are asking for what was already promised.

If we truly value people with disabilities and the elderly in our state, then we must value the workforce that makes their safety, dignity, and independence possible. Funding the statutory COLA is not just a budget decision. It is a statement about our priorities. It is fiscal integrity. And it is a moral obligation.

For Kate. For the thousands of vulnerable Mainers like her. And for the professionals who quietly hold their lives together every single day — I urge you to fully fund the statutory COLA.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,

Debbie Dionne'  
Topsham, Maine