



*"Striving to invigorate hope, bringing dreams to life."*

Testimony of Amanda Karomba, Happy Haven

*LD 209 An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary to the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2025*

Neither for nor Against

January 23, 2025

Good afternoon, Senator Rotundo, Senator Ingwersen, Representative Gattine, Representative Meyer, and esteemed members of both the Appropriations and Financial Affairs and Health and Human Services Committees.

My name is Amanda Karomba, and I have the honor of serving as the Chief Executive Officer of Happy Haven, primarily serving the Lewiston/Auburn area. I am also a proud resident of Lewiston, and deeply appreciative of Senator Rotundo's leadership in our community. Over the past eight years, Happy Haven has been committed to serving more than 60 adults in Maine who live with intellectual and developmental disabilities, autism, and brain injuries. Our services include group home supports, quarter-hour in-home support, and shared living tailored to meet the unique needs of each individual.

In addition to my role at Happy Haven, I am also a proud board member of the Maine Association for Community Service Providers (MACSP), where we work collaboratively to advocate for the essential services that our communities rely on.

I want to express my gratitude for the opportunity to address you today regarding the supplemental budget and to emphasize the critical need for your support in restoring and allocating funding for the MaineCare service rate cost of living adjustments, which are set to take effect on January 1, 2025, as outlined in LD 209 (An Act to Make Supplemental Appropriations and Allocations from the General Fund and Other Funds for the Expenditures of State Government and to Change Certain Provisions of the Law Necessary for the Proper Operations of State Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2025).

As we mark five years since the onset of the pandemic, our state continues to grapple with a pressing staffing shortage that affects our sector disproportionately. The issue stems largely from non-competitive wages, which drive dedicated professionals to seek employment in industries such as manufacturing, retail, and fast food. Those of us who provide direct care are acutely aware of the rising

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costs of living, including housing, food, childcare, and utilities, etc., that continue to strain our workforce.

While it is heartening to see minimum wage increases, and rightly so, our sector has not kept pace with these changes. At Happy Haven, we are facing significant challenges: high turnover rates, excessive overtime that is not factored into our funding rates, unoccupied beds in our facilities, and alarming burnout rates among our staff. These challenges have real consequences for the individuals we serve; many Mainers with profound behavioral and medical support needs find themselves trapped in emergency rooms when they should be receiving the care and support, they require in a home/community environment.

Stagnant wages combined with rising living costs have made it increasingly difficult to retain staff, resulting in a high turnover rate. This constant rotation of new DSPs disrupts the continuity of support, which is vital for the well-being of those we serve and the consistent delivery of quality services. New and inexperienced DSPs often leave quickly, driven by inadequate pay and overwhelming burnout. The responsibility of maintaining quality care has disproportionately fallen on the shoulders of dedicated individuals who have kept these services running, despite the lack of fair compensation for their crucial work.

The impact of unmanageable overtime costs is another critical challenge that organizations like Happy Haven face, further complicating our ability to provide consistent care for the individuals we serve. In just two weeks, Happy Haven paid out over 1,700 hours in overtime. With the costs of overtime not being built into our reimbursement rates, Happy Haven must absorb these expenses, diverting essential funds away from programs and services that directly benefit those we serve, (i.e., fewer resources for community activities, training, or even necessary supplies that enhance the quality of life for the individuals we serve). This creates reliance on overtime to meet staffing needs, which contributes to the cycle of burnout and exhaustion.

As group home supports become increasingly medicalized, the staffing shortages in hospitals directly affect us as we are expected to bridge the gap despite inadequate wages and a lack of professional recognition. Some individuals require two-on-one staffing due to behavioral needs, but we cannot sustain this level of care without livable, competitive wages to attract and retain qualified and experienced professionals.

Thank you for your dedication and commitment to ensuring that Mainers with disabilities are not left behind or forgotten. Your support helps provide them with the care, dignity, and opportunities they deserve and thrive on.

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