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Greetings, honorable members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services. My name is Janet Hamel. I live in Orono and I'm testifying in favor of LDs 878, 1157, 1204, 1267, and 1469. All of these bills address specific issues within the larger caregiving crises existing in the services provided to vulnerable Mainers, who include my 38-year-old daughter Marty.

Marty has intellectual and developmental disabilities, or IDD. She will always need help. Marty moved into her first apartment at age 21—just like her older sister did. This brave young woman with speech, cognitive, and other difficulties found that apartment life was a whole new world—scary sounds, new chores, cooking mishaps! Yet after moving into that apartment community for seniors and people with disabilities, Marty's apartment quickly became Home. She got her own cat, and cared for him with love. Over the next 12½ years she lived in her own apartment, often benefitting from waiver-funded part-time assistance.

But even though she had Section 21 waiver funding—the comprehensive waiver—for the 3 years that she lived in her first apartment in Bar Harbor, I was the person who helped her learn to do laundry, clean her apartment, do her grocery shopping, and plan and prepare meals...because the service-providing agency had difficulty hiring and retaining workers. In addition to helping her at her home, I frequently filled in as her job coach at the two local businesses where she worked part-time. Marty lost one 10-hr-per-week job she loved—NOT because the employer was unhappy with her performance—but because the employer tired of having strangers show up to work with Marty. They felt Marty was not getting the help she needed and their busy store staff could not provide that assistance.

We switched to the other service provider in Bar Harbor. They provided a job coach one summer—a nice college student—but sometimes she slept in and missed her shift with Marty, who would show up to work on time but not have the support needed. Then that job coach went back to college and they too couldn't staff Marty's work or home support positions. Once again, I was Marty's job coach and her home support provider (as well as her single mother), and I already worked full-time.

More importantly, I knew that I could not continue to be Marty's everything. The whole point of home and community based waiver services is to assist individuals who have disabilities live their own lives as independently as possible, with the support they need to learn, grow, and live safely. Who among you would want your mother coming to work with you every day throughout your lives? Who would want your mother to take you grocery shopping, help you get together with your adult friends, and keep “telling you what to do” throughout your life? I loved my mother dearly, but I was ready to fly with my own wings when she launched me off to college. And honestly, I knew Marty needed others to help her grow as an adult. After all, whose mother among you would never die?

Because the two service providers could not staff Marty's support positions, we left the Bar Harbor community we loved and moved to Orono so that Marty could “spend” her waiver funding to get the support services she needed to work her own jobs and live in her own home. We found a choice of service providing agencies in the greater Bangor area, and they had a larger pool of potential employees who might work for the low wages paid to direct service professionals (DSPs). Even in the less expensive greater Bangor region, over the years Marty has repeatedly experienced first hand the staffing crisis that all caregiving service providers face in hiring, training, retaining, and offering career growth opportunities to the people who care for our loved ones.

This caregiving staffing crisis is not solely a Maine phenomenon. It is a nationwide crisis, affecting people with IDD like Marty as well as elders and others who have health, medical, and/or behavioral care needs. The Covid pandemic has exacerbated both the national caregiving staffing crisis—and Maine's caregiving crisis.

What can we do in Maine to begin to address this multifaceted crisis in caregiving?

We can start by providing a living wage to the people who care for our loved ones. LDs 878, 1157, 1204, and 1267 all begin to address this complicated caregiving crisis in Maine. Because Covid has exacerbated the caregiving staffing crisis, service providers need hazard pay and reimbursement for additional pandemic costs incurred during the first part of this year—as covered in LD 1469.

Other reforms must be developed—and funded—to significantly transform caregiving into a respected, professional, valued career choice with advancement opportunities. But right now, the dedicated people who provide care and support to vulnerable people like my daughter need to earn enough money to pay for their own housing, food, transportation, health care, and child care.

Thank you for your consideration of my perspective, and for your work on our behalf.