

Deborah Riordan Dionne
Topsham

To: Health and Human Services Committee, State of Maine
Re: Written testimony in support of LD 283, LD 878, LD 1157, LD 1204, LD 1267, LD 1469
and LD 1477

Senator Gratwick, Representative Meyer, and distinguished members of the Joint
Standing Committee on Health and Human Services:

My name is Deborah Riordan Dionne and I am from Topsham Maine. I am in support of all bills addressing increased wages for direct care workforce. I am also very grateful to the legislators who have sponsored each of these bills that would be a positive step towards stabilizing the direct care workforce.

I am also the mom of a 41 year old woman with disabilities, and because of the traumatic circumstances during her birth, she has a lifelong diagnosis of Cerebral Palsy and an intellectual disability, Kate needs help with all of her daily, personal needs, struggles to walk without falls, and is mostly non-verbal. Out of necessity, I became my daughter's lifetime caregiver, case manager, and eventually full-time, advocate to children and adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. I am also a founding member of Community Connect Maine: a grassroots family driven network with the mission of connecting families, caregivers and communities to improve the system of care for the Developmental Disabilities (DD) community and related conditions. Our vision is that all people have the support they need, when they need it, to live full lives within their communities of choice.

To be clear, Kate is one of the lucky ones, because she has been receiving section 21 Waiver Services for the past 19 years. She was also lucky because she got the services she needed throughout her 21 years in public school. When Kate graduated, she only had to wait a year before she was granted section 21 residential and community support services. She did not fall off a cliff, and I did not have to quit my job teaching middle schoolers, Kate easily made the transition into a well run group home with 5 of her lifelong friends and housemates and round the clock, well trained, committed Direct Support Professionals. What an amazing accomplishment this has been for Kate to live her best life engaged in a community she loves, independent from her mom, and a far cry from a dire prognosis from the medical experts to place her at Pineland shortly after her birth.

Unfortunately, direct care agencies in Maine and across the nation are in a dire crisis to hire, train and retain DSP staff to provide quality support services. In four short years, and only since I started to track this data, Kate has had 81 DSPs funnel in and out of her life and her home. Kate's cheerful demeanor disappears, she retreats, becomes depressed and defeated, refuses to eat and her anxiety becomes severely heightened when she has to start all over to develop trust for new staff for help her with her most personal needs as she struggles to be understood with her limited language and unique style of communication. She becomes invisible.

I applaud the many hours of true collaborative work from each of the stakeholders across the continuum of caregivers who made up the Longterm Care Workforce Commission, and I fully support all of the prioritized recommendations of the committee. (Report: <http://legislature.maine.gov/doc/3852>) The findings in this report detail the change that is necessary to address the real crisis and to sustain the system of care for the longterm. The rate increase should not be approved for one group of caregivers (the elderly) and not the other (people with disabilities) Providers, caregivers, and the Mainers with lifelong disabilities who need these crucial services to live their daily lives deserve to finally become a priority in this 130th legislative session. Real human lives are at stake.

I urge you to pass legislation that will raise the starting wage of all direct care workers to no less than 125% of minimum wage, and to build in cost-of-living increases in order to keep up

with inflation and any increases in minimum wage.
Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,
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