

Tara Page
Branches LLC

Hello! My name is Tara Page. I have worked as a DSP for almost 10 years now- the battle continues with receiving funding from the state to better compensate our employees. Our DSPs work day in and day out to ensure that the individuals with developmental disabilities that we serve can live the most productive lives possible. For those of you who don't know what we do, we provide residential services for adults with developmental disabilities and autism, ensuring that they live safe, healthy, functional and fulfilling lives while promoting independence, community integration and skill development. Many/most of our individuals are reliant on staff to complete simple tasks that you and I are able to do without much effort (bathing/grooming, taking medications, cooking meals, feeding ourselves, making doctors appointments, household chores, laundry, etc.) Without DSPs, our individuals wouldn't be able to live in their own homes, wouldn't have access to the community and likely their medical, health and safety needs would not be met. As a whole, the State of Maine and the Federal Government has made great strides to ensure that individuals with developmental disabilities and autism are seen as equal and given equal rights and opportunities- the greatest piece of evidence towards this is deinstitutionalization. Without proper funding for our DSPs, institutionalization is bound to return, and that is just not an option.

Currently under Section 21, we are reimbursed at a rate of \$11.21/hour from the state. As you all know, minimum wage is \$12.15/hour... for an hourly rate less than minimum wage (that continues to increase), we are expected to be able to pay our employees and cover the costs that come with being employed (trainings, insurance, workman's comp, paid time off, etc.). Also, we have not received any increases in funding as minimum wage as increased, or for the increased costs when the Affordable Care Act was put into effect.

I do the hiring for Branches LLC and I have had numerous people turn down employment with us due to the pay, and seeing as someone can start at most fast food restaurants at \$14-\$16 an hour, there is no surprise that our company and companies such as ours state wide are experiencing extreme staffing shortages! Taking care of/being responsible for a human life at an hourly rate just above minimum wage vs. working at a fast food restaurant with minimal responsibilities at a higher rate of pay? Done deal for most people.

Before the pandemic, we had made progress towards funding increases, but due to COVID-19 and the shut down of legislation, our funding issues were tabled. And if DSP's didn't deserve it before, they 100% do now. Change for anyone is hard (remember a year ago when it all first started, how did you cope?) but for our individuals, these changes to vital routines and structure was world shaking; our staff not only had to cope themselves, but assist our individuals with understanding and coping as well (anyone who has worked in this field, or has a loved one with a developmental disability can understand what level of "behaviors" this would bring to the table).

Our staff spend more time with our individuals than their own families because the needs of our individuals is imminent, and someone has to do it. DSPs deserve so much more than the current funding allows us to provide, and our individuals deserve more DSPs.

Thank you for your time.