

Good morning, Senator Claxton, Representative Myer and members of the Health and Human Services Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of LD 1573 An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Commission To Study Long-term Care Workforce Issues.

My name is Victoria Ashton, and I am a DSP-CRMA for OHI in Bangor. I make 12.75 an hour and work anywhere from 35-50 hours a week. I own a home with my boyfriend, have a little over 10k in student loan debt, and drive a car that is literally falling apart because I can't afford a down payment or monthly payment on a vehicle that isn't a borderline death trap. After taxes I make about 1400 a month, which just *barely* puts me over the poverty line. Certainly not far enough to make a real difference, as before I was a homeowner (and technically, I'm not as it's only my boyfriend's name on the mortgage because his credit is far better than mine as I've only been able to maintain, not improve my credit) I was a renter, and paid half my salary monthly to have a roof over my head and electricity. You could say that it's because of the raising rates of everything in the US, but we know that's only a half truth, the reality is it's because things are getting more expensive but pay is staying the same.

I love my job. I worked retail for ten years before becoming a DSP and it's far more rewarding and fulfilling than any of those years had been. Still, I find myself considering going back to Target because their starting wage is now so much higher than what I get paid now. They also have far better insurance than we do here at OHI, something I know because of the radical difference in my medical copays.

DSPs are effectively government workers. We are organized by non-profits to take care of the state's disabled, to advocate for them when they have no voice of their own, and to often hold their hands and care when they have no one else in the world who will care about them when they're gone. Ours is an entirely vital service, and I don't know a single DSP who has not gone miles above and beyond a 12.75 pay rate. I briefly worked in a nursing home, when I was frustrated with how we were treated during the height of the pandemic, overlooked for any kind of pay relief, people constantly leaving the company and putting stress on the rest of us to fill hours that physically taxed everyone. I felt unappreciated and desperate, so I left for one entire week. The one shift that I worked at the nursing home showed me that what we do as DSPs is far more than just 'butt wipers' as we have been so derogatorily referred to in the past. We do everything a CNA does, and in some cases we are for some reason expected to do everything that in a hospital or nursing home setting a literal RN would be in charge of.

It seems a little unfair that all that is expected of us, but our pay is less than I would make at Target stocking shelves and getting screamed at by someone because we don't have exactly what they wanted in stock.

Statewide, DSP availability is at a critical level, and it's because our wages can't compete, and I really don't blame people for not wanting to work 20 hours of overtime just to be able to come out a little bit ahead on their bills that week. I physically would be unable to do that much overtime, so I struggle when I average 35 hours a week, and that shouldn't be my reality. I work 35 hours a week. I assist in bathing, I cook meals, I do paperwork, I calculate calories, I am a sounding board when no one else wants to listen. I love my job, I never want to work another job, but I find that more and more my adoration for what I do isn't enough when I'm deciding which bills can be late this month over others. I should be able to pay

my bills. I should be able to afford a decent car, so I'm able to once again take the people I support on outings. President Biden has been fighting in the capitol for a pay increase for all, but I believe to resolve the turnover rates for DSPs we should be getting paid more than minimum wage. Because we don't stock shelves, we don't mix drinks, we don't work in an assembly line. We immerse ourselves in someone else's life every day, trying to help them grow, help them thrive when all of society has been against them for most of their lives.

If DSPs are paid what we are truly worth, then we may actually have a chance of having fully staffed houses, of not having to juggle DSPs like they're balls, deciding which house is acceptable to be running at minimum staffing. I have worked at houses on minimum staffing, and I can say with confidence it's none of them. Even the house with two easy to work with people, they deserve equal attention. Which isn't possible if only one person is working.

So I ask you, pay us what we're worth. We already do the work, it's past time we're fairly compensated for it.

Thank you,

Victoria C Ashton