

David Cowing  
Woolwich

TO: The Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services

RE: L.D. 1573 An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Commission To Study Long-term Care Workforce Issues

DATE: May 3, 2021

Senator Claxton, Representative Meyer and Distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Health and Human Services.

My name is David Cowing, I live in Woolwich, and I'm a founding member of Community Connect Maine. My son, who has multiple disabilities, lives in a group home in Bath. I'd like to speak in support of LD 1573.

First, I want to thank Representative Fay for her leadership on the Long-term Workforce Commission, as well as her present advocacy to see the work of the commission come to fruition. I also want to acknowledge the efforts of this committee during the previous legislature to recognize and address the dire situation Maine's Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) face, along with the families and individuals they support.

The DSPs that provide essential services to Maine citizens with IDD, like my son, do difficult and heroic work daily for very low pay. This low pay is a major factor in the staff turnover at my son's group home, and poses a chronic challenge. The situation is very hard on my son and his housemate.

Just this past week my wife and I learned that weekend staff at our son's home were out, and the house manager had to try and find multiple DSPs to cover the shifts that needed to be filled. When I stopped by the house to see if we could offer any help with the situation, my son asked me repeatedly who would be at the house that evening and the following day. I tried to reassure him that the substitute staff would hopefully be people he'd at least met at one time or another. He finally went up to his bedroom, and the house manager (who was temporarily covering an unfilled shift) asked to speak with me outside. She let me know that she had resigned her position because she needed a break. Her regular job managing group home clients and staff, coupled with filling in for unfilled staff shifts, often results in 60 hour (or more) work weeks, and she was just feeling burned out. She said through tears that she felt very invested in her relationship with my son, and asked if she could visit him in the future.

Though the loss of her skill, knowledge, and compassionate relationship with my son was very distressing to me, this situation is very familiar. Manager and staff turnover has been a problem at my son's home for years. It has been my experience that most DSPs must work more than one job, or rely on significant amounts of overtime, to make ends meet--in addition to all their other family obligations. Frequently this results in burnout. Staff leave their DSP position for higher paying and less stressful jobs at Loew's, McDonald's or Circle K. Their departure just puts pressure on other staff to work overtime, and managers often must assume empty shifts on top of all their other duties. The support system for my son can become frayed and feel at risk of falling apart. Ultimately it is my son who must also pay the price for a DSP's inadequate paycheck.

DSPs are asked to manage my son's complex behavioral support plan. Both he and his housemate must have their medications managed and both become stressed when their normal staff schedule becomes disrupted. Individuals like my son who have physical, intellectual and mental health disabilities require high levels of skill and compassion on the part of DSPs providing care to them. Recruiting and retaining DSPs is a major problem not just at my son's house but throughout the state. Maine needs to prioritize supporting these workers and recognize the essential work they do. Appropriate compensation for a job with significant responsibilities will help alleviate the critical DSP shortage Maine has faced for years--one that has been made even

more severe by the COVID pandemic. Direct Support Professionals deserve more than minimum, or subminimum, wages.

My hope is that this committee will support LD 1573.

Thank you for your time today.

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