

Written Testimony in Support of LD 1573

An Act To Implement the Recommendations of the Commission To Study Long-term Care Workforce Issues

Health and Human Services Committee

Monday, May 3, 2021

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 Heidi Mansir, I am the Executive Director of Uplift, Inc. Uplift is a private nonprofit that provides services to 187 individuals with intellectual and developmental (ID/DD) disabilities in the Kennebec Valley region. We have been providing services in this community for more than 60 years.

As I draft this testimony, I have just left a meeting with some of the individuals we support, families, guardians, case managers, and members of our Board of Directors. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss whether we are going to close one of our programs. Our Board has been reviewing the viability of this program for several months. Closing this program would have a very drastic impact on at least 29 individuals who have been part of the Uplift family for most of their lives.

Uplift is not discussing closing this program because the service is unwanted, or unneeded, there was a lot of fear, sadness and emotion displayed when we started talking about the possibility. People are having a very hard time understanding why we would close a program that they want so much. I had to explain that we do not “want” to close the program, but we may “have” to close because we just cannot hire enough staff to keep it open.

At one time, Uplift was one of the larger employers in Gardiner, Maine where our main office is located, employing approximately 200 people in this small community. At the start of the pandemic, our staff numbers had dropped to 144. Today, we have 118 employees trying to provide the same amount of services. It is not sustainable. People are tired.

At the meeting, family members asked why we cannot recruit and retain staff. Many were astonished to hear that our reimbursement rate to pay our staff is below minimum wage. They could not understand how the “State” could expect highly trained Direct Support Professionals (DSP’s) to work for such low wages when the McDonald’s around the corner is hiring at \$14 dollars and hour, and Walmart is advertizing jobs to start at \$16 dollars per hour. I did not have an answer for their question.

I started my career in this field working as a caregiver. I was hired at Uplift in 1992 when minimum wage was \$4.25. My starting wage was \$6.20, 146% of the minimum at the time. With the opportunity for regular increases, I was able to earn a living wage to help support my family. That is not the case for DSP’s who are beginning their career today. Many need to work at least two jobs and multiple hours of overtime just to feed their kids.

As a provider of services for more than 30 years and as a family member of an individual with a developmental disability, I have never been more concerned about our service system. The system is in crisis. In Maine, there is no other care option for individuals; the network of community providers is the very fragile safety net.

In closing, I thank you for your time and ask you to please provide relief to these workers and save these very important services. Please vote to pass LD 1573.

Thank you,

Heidi Mansir
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Gardiner, Maine