

Dear Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, and Members of the Committee on Labor and Housing,

My name is Jillian Gruber. I am a Residential Support Worker and have worked at Shalom House Inc. in Portland since 2018.

Shalom House is a publicly funded nonprofit that provides community-based mental health support services in Cumberland and York County. A large portion of our services are staffed residential treatment programs including group homes, supported apartments and supported housing. Residential Support Workers in these programs provide some of the most critical mental-health care in our community, working with clients one-on-one to meet their daily needs and improve their quality of life. For most support workers, doing this work is a calling and we're passionate about the well-being of our clients.

Earlier this year, support workers at Shalom House announced an intent to unionize. We want to form a union to secure a fair and livable wage, improve workplace safety, seek transparency and accountability, and have a voice in decision-making that will improve client well-being. However, we were met with a strong anti-union campaign from administration.

This campaign included multiple mandatory captive audience meetings for part-time and full-time support workers. These employees' normal work days or days off were interrupted by being required to attend these meetings at the organization's administrative office. Some employees were coming to these meetings immediately after an 11-hour awake overnight shift. The short notice and the mandatory nature of the meetings meant that time was being taken away from supporting clients who we would otherwise be engaging in services such as taking them to medical appointments, facilitating recreational opportunities, and promoting personal care.

At the anti-union meeting, I felt talked down to and my concerns dismissed. My coworkers and I did not have a fair and equal opportunity to discuss anti-union claims that were being made, nor did it feel like a safe environment to do so. Administrative employees and managers who are not part of the bargaining unit were interspersed in the audience of the meeting in a way that felt manipulative, isolating, and pressuring. I left the meeting with a greater sense of mistrust, and I witnessed a coworker immediately call their supervisor to resign after the meeting because of what they experienced. The fact that employees were required to be there is a form of coercion. Considering Shalom House's services are being publicly funded by DHHS reimbursement, I feel especially alarmed that precious financial resources (let alone the time being taken away from clients) were spent for employees to attend meetings with anti-union lawyers and administration.

I am asking that you support LD 1756 to ban mandatory captive audience meetings, because I experienced how toxic, hostile, and disruptive captive audience meetings are to a workplace, and they are counter to our right to free speech. Support workers and all employees should have the right to refuse to attend these meetings. We should be allowed to focus on our actual work (providing vital mental health support) without fear of disciplinary action or repercussion for missing a meeting that is intended to influence our vote. Please pass LD 1756 to protect employee freedom of speech.