



Representative Nelson and Members of the House Appropriations-Human Resources Division Committee-

My name is Sargianna Wutzke and I am the Lead Operations Officer for Community Options. Community Options is a member of the North Dakota Association of Community Providers, a group of 31 Developmental Disabilities providers across the state of North Dakota. Each of the agencies has their own unique services but we all have one common goal and that is to be able to deliver individualized, community-based services to individuals with developmental disabilities.

Despite each agency varying in size and service delivery models, we all have many of the same struggles including workforce shortages, wages, turnover, and the ability to accept individuals into services. Currently in the state, there are more than 1,000 individuals needing services but due to a number of reasons the number one being our staff shortages, they are not able to receive these much-needed services.

Direct Support Professionals or DSPS are the staff that work directly with the individuals receiving services. In the state, there are over 5,000 direct support professionals. These staff are the heart of each of our organizations assisting over 7,000 individuals daily to live as independent lives as possible. The starting wage for this position varies amongst agencies and programs however it is generally between \$14-\$16 an hour.

Direct Support Professionals have many different roles they fulfill to the individuals they support including teacher, medical caregiver, driver, shopper, and cook. On a typical day, a direct support professional will assist individuals with their medical needs including medication administration, catheter care and feedings via g-tube along with taking individuals to appointments and ensuring they are assisting individuals to follow doctor's recommendations. DSPS assist individuals with their needed personal cares such as showering, freshening and toothbrushing. They prompt individuals and assist as needed with maintaining their home, ensuring safety in their home and cooking. DSPS transport individuals into the community to shop, go to community activities and to meet their friends and family.

Many Direct Support Professionals have to deal with many situations that the general public finds unpleasant. Some of these include individuals hitting, kicking, throwing items, and chasing after the direct support professionals. Direct Support Professionals receive training to ensure they are equipped to handle situations like these.

Along with assisting individuals in these aspects of their lives, DSPS also have required documentation that needs to be completed including data taken on each individual's goals and objectives as well as writing a narrative of what they did with each individual during their shift. Direct Support Professionals have all these different roles and responsibilities for an average starting wage of \$14-\$16 an hour.

My son is a senior in high school and works at Target. He has worked there for a year and a half as a stocker. His job is pretty clear cut he gets freight and puts it on the floor. He makes \$17 an hour and this summer he made \$18 an hour because Target bumped staff's wages short term because they were short staffed. Target can raise their prices to increase salaries, developmental disabilities providers cannot do that. Developmental Disabilities providers only have one funding source.

I have been in this field for twenty years and have never seen a staffing crisis like the one we are in currently. We are a statewide organization and I oversee four offices throughout our state, and I cannot remember the last time we were fully staffed for Direct Support Professionals in any of those offices. We are not only struggling to fill DSP positions but also Supervisor and Program Coordinator positions. We are getting very few qualified applicants for any positions requiring a degree because they can go to other fields and make more money. The turnover rate for DSPS in ND is 47%. In the governor's state of the state address, he discussed that the turnover rate for state employees was 15%. Our DSPS who work directly with individuals we serve turnover rate is over three times that of state employees. This rate has such a negative effect on the individuals we support as it is hard for them to have that much change when it comes to their staff who assist them with the most personal things in their lives.

I strongly encourage you to support the \$1.88 on the brick as well as the inflationary increase for DD providers. Wages are the biggest issue to keeping staff in our field. Many of our staff come into the field because they want to make a difference in the lives of the people we support. An overwhelming response as to why they leave is wages. We do voluntary exit surveys when our staff leave our agency and, in those interviews, the huge majority of DSPS state they are leaving to go somewhere else to get paid more and many times to have less responsibilities.

As providers who serve individuals with developmental disabilities, we want to be able to serve individuals with the services they are wanting unfortunately right now we are falling short of being able to do that. I urge you to please consider one of our most vulnerable populations and their needs as you look at the inflationary increase for the staff who do so much for them.

Sargianna Wutzke

Lead Operations Officer, Community Options Inc.