

Testimony Regarding House Bill 1012
Scott Burtsfield, The Vocational Training Center
Senate Appropriations Committee
Senator Ray Holmberg, Chairman
March 11, 2021

Good Afternoon. My name is Scott Burtsfield, and I am extremely honored and privileged to serve as the Executive Director for the Vocational Training Center (VTC), a licensed service provider for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, located in Fargo, North Dakota. I want to first thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about House Bill 1012.

As most of you are aware, in 2018 a new payment system was implemented that forever changed the landscape regarding how North Dakota pays for services to those providing care and support for individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Now, a couple of years into the new system, we realize our task is not quite completed.

We still have work to do - and we are doing it. Community providers, working diligently and collaboratively with Developmental Disabilities Division leadership, have recently rebalanced deficiencies pertaining to inadequate reimbursement rates for day-time services. Essentially, whether supported individuals attend their Day programs or not, providers of those Day Services remain responsible for providing 100 percent of the staffing, resources, etc. without compensation for the services and expenses they incur based on the expected attendance. Though the issue was evident at the onset of our payment system over two years ago, it has only worsened over time.

These issues compounded with increasing regulatory requirements, escalating operational costs, and rising employment related expenses have forced many provider organizations to be looking at ways of doing much more with much less.

As you can see, in our industry, there is no shortage of trials, tribulations, transformations and reforms. However, through it all, there has been one fundamental element to the success of the individuals we support. This has always been our Direct Support Professionals (DSPs).

For most of the state's providers of I/DD programs, well over 80% of budgets go directly to the salaries and benefits of Direct Service Professionals, and rightfully so. They are undeniably invaluable as the core personnel providing direct care services for North Dakota's most vulnerable citizens.

The incredible Direct Support Professionals in our state literally give their blood, sweat and tears to provide support and care for the state's most vulnerable population. Their jobs are often demanding, stressful, and physically and emotionally exhausting. At times, their work is even dangerous or harmful. But they also form bonds of trust and companionship that transcends stereotypical "worker/client" relationships, often becoming like family members.

However, our DSPs are increasingly held to much higher standards in terms of what is expected of them in their day-to-day work. In the last nearly three years there has been heightened standards, training requirements, data collection and entry...the list goes on. These expectations have been imposed upon them with implementation of many of the new rules, policies, and mandates since the implementation of the new payment system.

As a show of appreciation for DSPs increasing roles, responsibilities, expectations, and hazardous job duties, the Governor is recommending our DSPs and our services for individuals with disabilities be treated as "less than." "Less than" his recommendations for increases in other industries, "less than" his support for other professionals, and "less than" state employees who do not face being hit, bit, kicked, covered in human excrement daily.

The Governor's recommendation of a 1% living adjustment comes at a time when it is increasingly difficult to retain current employees and attract potential candidates, a time when our DSPs keep seeing the cost of living continues to rise while their spending power decreases, a time in which it much easier and tempting to find employment outside of our field, and a time when most major retailers and other local industries such as service jobs, warehouse and fast-food positions are offering better pay with much less pressure, responsibility and regulatory requirements. For example:

- A local manufacturing company's starting pay is \$2.00 per hour more for an entry level position.
- Average Administrative assistant salaries statewide are over \$1 per hour more than our DSP's and don't even come with the added benefit of the potential for bodily harm our DSPs face every day!
- Recently, our organization actually placed 2 individuals in entry level jobs making more than the DSPs that are supporting them in that job!!
- McDonald's, Walmart, COSTCO and many others have starting wages greater than the DSPs in those communities.

I've spent over well over 25 years working in the nonprofit world. I believe I speak for many when I proclaim that we're used to making do and having to just get by. We're used to

balancing priorities based on budget restrictions. We're used to stretching the dollar as much as we can. It's truly a shame the things you get used to. But the supported individuals and DSPs in our state deserve better.

Therefore, I am asking you to not compromise services to the state's most vulnerable adults or jeopardize the workforce that supports them. Please cast aside the Governor's recommendation and support NDACP's request to leave provider services rates unscathed and support a 3% increase for each year of the biennium for service providers and the Direct Support Professionals we employ.

Again, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about House Bill 1012.

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