



House Bill 1012 – Department of Health and Human Services Budget
House Appropriations – Human Resources Division
February 5, 2025

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.

Our agencies provide individualized services to individuals throughout the continuum of life, from birth to death, throughout the state. Our agencies strive to be able to meet the needs of individuals where they would like to live in our state. Community Options has assisted individuals to remain living in their communities of Lisbon, Carrington, Forman, Cavalier, Milnor and Gladstone instead of the individuals having to move to bigger cities to receive the necessary services. We also have supported individuals to move to bigger cities and then move back to their small hometown when they realize the big city is not where they want to reside anymore. There are many other developmental disabilities providers who also offer services in bigger communities as well as rural areas to meet the needs of people who receive services from the organizations.

DD providers work with the most vulnerable populations in the state. We are all committed to ensuring that each person is valued as an individual and each person is in charge of their services. The amount of services each individual receives is based on the support needs of the person. One individual may have staff just a few times a week for two hours each time where another individual may have twenty four hour support from staff.

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. DSPS 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, applying deodorant and toothbrushing. They prompt individuals and assist as needed with maintaining their home, ensuring safety in their home, cooking and communicating with their landlords. 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 situations that the general public finds unpleasant. Some of these include individuals hitting, kicking, throwing items, spitting, pulling hair and chasing after the direct support professionals. DSPS receive ongoing 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. They also have to document incidents that occur, complete data on behavior support plans and data on medical protocols.

The turnover rate for DSPS in ND is 40%. The turnover rate for the state of ND overall is 5.1%. Tina Bay testified on Monday that the turnover rate in her department is 7%. Our turnover 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. Last session our turnover rate for Direct Support Professionals was 47%. Last session, DD provider staff received a 2% each year along with a dollar an hour increase for DSPS. We believe this has assisted in being more competitive with other field-related jobs, however we are still not close to field-related positions such as CNAs who start at an average of \$3 more an hour. DD agencies also have increased wages for our staff to ensure we were able to have the amount of staff needed to support individuals receiving services. Currently our average wage for DSPS is \$20.89 an hour. Agencies are paying an average of \$3 an hour more than what we are being reimbursed with our funding. We are asking that all of our programs be fully funded. We are also asking for an inflationary increase of 4% and 3%. When doing research these amounts were the amounts that made us able to keep up with federal inflation.

We are also asking that accreditation be voluntary. Organizations feel that the state does a very thorough job with their oversight of provider agencies, which is far greater than the accreditation that takes place by an outside organization. The state ensures quality assurance of each agency by monitoring all general event reports (incident reports) of each agency as well as doing training and monitoring with each agency every three years where they go over those incident reports with administration as well as the DD Program Administrator. Every three years, the State Home and Community Based Surveyor comes and does a comprehensive survey of each agency.

Agencies that provide ICF level of care have surveys by Title 19 yearly. On top of these quality assurance safeguards, any agency that is representative payee for an individual is subject to extremely thorough financial audits by Protection and Advocacy.

Accreditation is expensive for an organization. In 2024, Community Options had our accreditation through CQL, and it cost us approximately \$25,000. SB 2192 is a bill this session for payment for accreditation for provider organizations, however the fiscal note with the bill currently is probably one third of what would be needed to cover accreditation costs for agencies.

I strongly encourage you to support fully funding all of our programs 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 want, 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.