

**HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
HUMAN RESOURCES DIVISION  
REPRESENTATIVE JON NELSON, CHAIRMAN  
HB 1012  
TESTIMONY OF DORI LESLIE, CHI FRIENDSHIP (NDACP MEMBER)  
FEBRUARY 4, 2025**

Good morning Chairman Nelson and members of the committee. I am Dori Leslie, Executive Director of CHI Friendship, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share with you my thoughts on additional resources needed for the workforce for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities and how this has a direct impact on employment for people with disabilities. CHI Friendship has been providing services to people with disabilities in the Fargo and Grafton/Park River areas since 1974. Today we serve over 250 clients and have about 350 staff. Our major areas of service to people with developmental disabilities are in group homes, apartments, and in vocational/employment settings.

As a state, North Dakota can and should take great pride in the outstanding services it has provided over the years to people with disabilities. Among the reasons North Dakota has been recognized as such a strong leader in this field is because of the outstanding leadership from the Department of Human Services, the quality of care from providers, and the important ongoing support of our state legislators. Thank you. We cannot allow ourselves to slip away from the high benchmarks we have achieved together.

We have come so far in our field. As you are aware of our field's history, years ago, people would only get support for food, shelter, and personal hygiene. We then moved to a model of individualizing supports for the person and placing them into a community. Today, our state has something very exciting in front of us and we are on

the cusp of something very wonderful for people in our state – all people with disabilities becoming contributors to our community and not just consumers in our community.

Our greatest staff are challenging people to not only have good friends, but to be a good friend. Not only to receive from families, coworkers, and neighbors, but to give to our families, coworkers, and neighbors. But, one of the greatest joys we have seen is the smiles on the faces of people we support when they receive their first paycheck on the job. Whether it's Jay getting paid for making his candy bouquets, Dirk collecting his money for his vending business, or Todd getting paid after cleaning the food court at West Acres Mall, we cannot let this dream fade for all people because this is what people want and deserve.

This dream continues with our commitment to invest in our workforce by providing a respectable wage for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). We need to continue to be able to hire quality staff, stop the revolving door, and keep the best staff that know and develop trust with the people they are working with. Inexperienced and unskilled staff have a direct correlation to people with disabilities achieving the American dream while having meaningful employment.

As the Executive Director, I can give you this personal testimony of how we are finding it increasingly difficult to find these qualified staff. This makes it very challenging to remain in compliance with our industrie's oversight systems in areas such as community integration. More importantly, I have observed how this negatively impacts the lives of people with disabilities. I have seen our clients lose their direct hire jobs and their self-employment businesses. One of the main reasons for this is we are

losing our best employees to jobs where they can earn more and work less. This has caused our vacancy rates to go up and our hiring standards to go down.

To say that Direct Support Professionals have difficult work would be a huge understatement. Direct Support Professionals are the backbone of our industry as they are responsible for administering medications, assisting with personal hygiene, behavior supports, keeping people safe, and helping each person find meaningful employment.

To continue to move momentum forward with our dream of decreasing staff dependency, and finding meaningful employment for all clients, we need qualified and tenured Direct Support Professionals. Direct Support Professionals are a must as this is where the rubber meets the road in our service delivery and they have the greatest impact by bridging a person with a disability to successful employment. Unfortunately, we have seen many of these staff walk away in recent years. Think for a moment how you chose your line of work. You most likely were exposed to a wide variety of options, you most likely changed courses many times, you assessed your strengths and weaknesses, and you followed your passions into the occupation where you are today. These are some of the reasons why finding employment for people with disabilities is such a difficult task.

There are many benefits to people with disabilities being employed. Ronald Reagan said that the best social program is a job and we couldn't agree more. We have seen over and over the impact that employment has on the lives of people with disabilities. Employment has a direct effect on a person's self-esteem, a meaningful life, and friendships. Employment is tied not only to income, but to self-worth, a sense

of accomplishment, and friendships. This is how we are supporting people with disabilities to contribute in our communities and increase their quality of life. We need to continue to partner together and remain committed to the integration mandate of the Olmstead decision, have people with disabilities embedded into the fabric of their communities, and ensure that all people of working age should work, regardless of their disability.

Robert Greenleaf once said that awareness is not a giver of solace, but it is a disturber and an awakener. We should all be awakened and disturbed by our diminishing workforce of our population's most vulnerable and the negative impact it is having. Let's all once again join together and continue to lead our field forward in the direction it needs to be to better employ, to better integrate, and to better dignify the lives of people with disabilities.

I ask that you support the 4% & 3% inflationary increases, to repair our workforce and enhance the extremely difficult service packages people need to succeed in their communities. It is essential to ensure that reimbursement rates are adjusted to account for inflation. Without these adjustments, the ability to recruit and retain qualified staff, as well as maintain service levels, is at serious risk. This increase aligns with the federal inflation levels for the previous two years.

Thank you.