

House Committee on Finance and Appropriations
Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services

Testimony of Kurt A. Miller

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April 10, 2019

Chairman Sprague, Ranking member West and members of the Finance Subcommittee my name is Kurt Miller and I am the President/CEO of Empowering People Inc. I would like to thank you all for giving me the opportunity to speak here today. Empowering People is a healthcare management company that provides services to over 700 Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities in licensed ICF homes, I/O waiver homes and in day programs and community employment placements. We currently have over 1200 wonderful employees in our organization.

I would like to start by offering my support of Director Davis' DODD budget proposal. I am very appreciative of his and the departments commitment to increased funding in the areas of direct support, transportation services, on site/on call services, and his commitment to creativity in serving youth with behavioral needs. These are all services that have been neglected for years and the pledge being offered in this budget is a significant step in correcting those oversights.

The life line of serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities is the direct support professional (DSP). I would like to start by painting a picture of an average day of a DSP in our field. On any given day, in addition to providing personal care which includes bathing/showering, dressing, mouth care, feeding, and toileting or peri-care to the people we serve, a DSP is also a nurse passing medications and providing treatment which can include injections. They are also an occupational therapist, a physical therapist, a speech therapist, a teacher, a dietician, a chef, a housekeeper, a maintenance worker, a chauffeur, a crisis counselor, a job coach, a liaison to family and doctors, and most importantly a friend and confidant. All of these skills are acquired through continuous training. All of these responsibilities are completed knowing that at times you may be verbally abused or physically abused including being hit, kicked, punched, spit on, hair pulled and have objects thrown at you. DSP's are consistently asked, and in some cases required, to work double shifts and sacrifice their time with their families and friends. DSP's complete all of these duties knowing that if a mistake is made they may not only lose their job, but have charges pressed against them in a court of law.

I imagine all of you hearing this must believe that the people doing this job are paid \$15 or \$20/hr., when in actuality the average wage in our state for DSP's is \$11.12, with the average starting wage being lower than that. We are asking the people that serve our most vulnerable citizens to provide all of the services listed above and forfeit time with their own family and friends for \$11/hr. How many people do you think are willing to complete all of the duties listed for \$11/hr.? I started in the field as a DSP many years ago and I am amazed when I look at all of

the additional duties that have been added over the years while wages have not increased commensurate with cost of living, let alone to compensate DSPs for the scope of the work they are completing on a daily basis. Add in the constant fear of a mistake leading to charges and I doubt I would have remained in this field of service for all these years. I would have missed out on a profession and calling that I love.

We are currently facing a DSP crisis in our field that is on the path to becoming a collapse in the next 3-5 years. The average turnover in our field is 51% and growing each year. The stagnant wages combined with the scope of work and real possibility of being verbally and physically assaulted along with possible legal issues is a deterrent to recruiting and retaining DSPs. Combine unemployment being at an all-time low and increased competition in the workplace and our field will continue to see our workforce depleted in the coming years. Additionally, with the vision of our field shifting to more community based services we will require MORE DSP's, not less, in the coming years. While there are some legislative actions that may help with recruitment and retention, it ultimately comes down to wages. As the path in our field continues toward smaller, community based homes we will serve people in smaller settings that we never have before, people with significant medical needs, increased behavioral needs and even more daily living assistance. Absent a wage increase that compensates DSPs appropriately for the scope of work that is completed on a daily basis I fear that more and more Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities will be left without services.

A person seeking employment in today's market will see average starting wages at places like Wal-Mart, McDonalds and Sheetz at around \$11/hr., the same as our field. The difference is the scope of duties will be much less and there will be no fear of prosecution if a simple mistake is made. I actually have a job coach that has assisted a person with a disability secure a job that was paying the person served a HIGHER WAGE than the employee that helped the person get hired! How do we retain our valued employees after situations like that occur?

In Director Davis' budget proposal he has devised a plan that will increase homemaker/personal care DSP wages to \$12.38 over the biennium, with the assistance of local county boards which is wonderful, However, there is currently no plan in the budget to increase DSP wages in the ICF program or day services program. An increase in both of these areas is essential to the continued success of our system. In my opinion, the reason you are seeing such a substantial commitment from the county boards is due to the lack of service providers for people currently seeking I/DD services. I receive requests for service providers daily and unfortunately I cannot offer services because I cannot staff my existing locations. I mentioned earlier that I currently have 1200 employees; it would be over 1400 if I could fill all of my open positions.

Our current employees must work double shifts for 3-5 days a week just to make a living. The current wage is below is the federal poverty level for a family of 4. When you combine the hours worked with the level of responsibility it very often leads to job burnout. It is for all of these reasons that we are requesting a budget increase that will allow for a minimum of \$13.00/hr. for DSPs in our field. While that may still be below what a DSP should be compensated for all of the services they provide it would help our field be more competitive in the job market and hopefully attract new employees and retain them. This request is outlined in greater detail in the OPRA white paper.

Without an increase in funding to compensate DSPs appropriately for the services they provide our system is headed for a collapse and many Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities will be left without services. Thank you so much for your time and attention and I welcome any questions you may have.