

Chairman Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking members Sweeney, and members of the House Finance Committee, my thanks to all of you for hearing so many voices of testimony and concern. My name is Tony Thomas, I am Executive Director of Welcome House in Cleveland, OH. We have 43 group homes, 2 apartment buildings, and 20 persons with IDD living in their own apartments or condos. We serve 205 people with developmental disabilities. We have 320 staff but in reality that number is 80 staff short of where it needs to be. At the beginning of the pandemic we had over 400 staff supporting the 205 persons served. We have not been able to climb out of that staff deficit since fall of 2021. And our yearly agency budget just experiences deficit after deficit.

I have been Executive Director since 1999 at my agency. I have never, ever seen the kind of staff shortage like this at our agency. It has left me feeling very concerned about the future of our agency, and the overall health and well-being of our current staff. We have numerous current staff who are working excessive amounts of overtime. In 2022 we had over \$500,000 in overtime alone. That will lead to staff burnout, it already has, and while current staff love the extra money that comes with overtime from this pandemic, it will eventually lead to some long-time staff leaving our field due to not seeing a light at the end of the tunnel.

In January of 2020, before the pandemic took hold of our lives in March of 2020, I had a chance with some colleagues from Cleveland to travel to Youngstown, OH to hear about a program called an Employer Resource Network(ERN). An ERN is a business model created by the auto industry in Michigan over 20 years ago that helped businesses to create pathways for helping current employees deal with the re-occurring challenges that come with living on this planet...loss of a spouse, financial hardship, alcohol and drug problems. The ERN employs a Success Coach that works with staff on some of their most challenging issues---to keep them on the job.

Youngstown in 2020 had just started their model with Trumbull and Mahoning County Boards of DD funding and nonprofit DD agencies. Toledo had also a great model but started their ERN in 2019. Partnering with the Lucas County Board of DD, 10 DD providers hired a Success Coach to provide supportive services to current staff and help them with their major life challenges---again to keep them on the job.

We came back from Youngstown meeting with great ideas and hope... The largest agencies in Cleveland banded together in 2020 and 2021 and created a separate nonprofit entity. The Developmental Disabilities Provider Consortium was created and we formed a board of directors, wrote a grant, and got funding from the Cleveland Foundation and the Cuyahoga County Board of DD.

We started our ERN in September of 2021. Hired a Success Coach, Cassandra, who has worked with over 200 of our frontline staff among 8 DD organizations. Cassandra and our agencies have addressed these issues: serious and undiagnosed health issues, lack of medical care, financial hardship, lack of childcare, domestic violence, car problems, and the most troubling aspect of our staff, homelessness. Fourteen staff from our consortium last summer experienced homelessness, including two of my staff.

I have been Executive Director for 24 years and have never seen the types of life challenges that our staff have faced since this pandemic started.

In the Health and Human Services Subcommittee, the past two weeks, two important questions were asked by Chairwoman Carruthers; and you will ask them again in this committee: Is the current funding

enough??? And, secondly, what can we do as a state to encourage more young people to enter the DD field as Direct Support Professionals??? The answer to the first question is NO unfortunately, we need a salary range that is comparable and competitive. On the second question that answer is YES.... but it will require a better wage structure to incentivize the “learning curve” of young persons toward our field; one example could be to provide high school credit for high school juniors or seniors to volunteer at nursing homes and group homes for persons with IDD.

Secondly, The Ohio Alliance of Direct Support Professionals (OADSP), along with many other system stakeholders, has been working on getting young people into the profession for the past few years. OADSP has a program called DSP-U that works with local providers and county boards of developmental disabilities to introduce high school students into the role of the DSP and the joys of working in the system.

I want to thank the Governor DeWine for providing the necessary first step in our wage growth, I want to thank Director Hauck for her leadership in this pandemic and her sensitivity to our needs as providers I want to thank Ranking Member Sweeney for visiting one of our group homes last year to talk directly to our staff and clients. And a special thank you to Chairperson Edwards for his leadership of this effort and his sincere offer of help.

All of you should feel proud, as I do, of what our frontline staff are doing today under great duress and tremendous staff shortages. We will see a change....but seek from you your support to make the change happen in our field.

Our agencies, our staff, our families, and most of all our clients need you now more than ever.