



Chairwoman Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and esteemed committee members, I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Joshua Peterson. Prior to September of 2022, I was a DSP who was very invested in my career and the disability support industry. Having grown up with parents who had also worked in this field for decades, I came to the role of a DSP very eagerly. While it would be years before I began to see it as a potential career, I knew it was work that I really wanted to do, and work that needed desperately to be done— a sentiment that countless other DSPs have shared with me over the past twenty years. I began my career as a camp counselor providing direct support for people with disabilities as Camp Echoing Hills in the summer of 1998, before eventually becoming a fulltime DSP with RHDD, Inc in Coshocton County, OH in 2003.

After attending my first professional conference, the OADSP Summit, in the spring of 2014, and later becoming certified under OADSP's DSPath's credentialing curriculum in the summer of 2015, I sought to expand my engagement in my field and career by serving on OADSP's DSP Council, and within my own organization in different programs. This time in my career took me many places and stoked my passion for the field, with my main goal being to see the end of this industry's decades-long workforce crisis. I spoke on the steps of this statehouse in 2019 to advocate for higher wages, I have presented at conferences about the importance of DSPs being engaged and learning to advocate for themselves. The point is, I very much saw myself as someone who would be with this career until I retired— as someone who would endure the struggles as long as it took to see the day that the foundational support this workforce needs came, and the value this work provides to Americans with disabilities and their families was made as ubiquitous and well-understood as the value of any other professional sector.

However, in the spring of 2021, my spouse and longtime partner of 20 years suffered a massive heart attack and was left with chronic health conditions that required much more medical care than I could afford on my own, or with the healthcare options provided by my employer. We were fortunately able to receive care under the expanded Medicaid coverage offered under the public health emergency of the pandemic. This coverage provided life-saving medication and medical care for my spouse, but put our household in a very dire situation— one in which we were entirely unable to afford to pay for private healthcare coverage, and also in constant danger of losing that coverage if our financial circumstances

were to improve. As the cost of living continued to rise, I was forced to make a very difficult decision; seek alternate employment at a company that provided a higher base wage and comprehensive medical coverage that would allow us to no longer rely on Medicaid, or make the choice to become a part time employee with my existing company and apply for greater assistance. So, given those choices, I made the choice to leave the career I had built over the past twenty years to take an entry level position with Charter (also know as Spectrum, an internet, cable company, and phone company), which provided me with a living wage and benefits package.

While we are very much enjoying living with greater comfort now, and without the looming threat of being unable to pay for his medication and care, making this decision upended my entire world, and brought no small amount of chaos and hardship to the clients I had supported for many years and the coworkers I had worked alongside. I am often asked if I would consider returning to this field, which is one I still believe is very important. However, the financial reality of my life and the lives of many DSPs who leave this field ultimately has the final say. I would be able to return— and gladly do so— for a living wage that started at \$20.00 an hour, in addition to seeing foundational resources given to the provider agencies that would allow them to create a workforce infrastructure that ensures consistent and reliable healthcare coverage and opportunities for advancement commensurate with wages. Now, when Bethany asked me if I would be willing to share my story today, she asked me to consider what it would take for me to come back to the field. She did not share with me what amount it was that stakeholders were asking for until after she saw my testimony. So, to say that I am pleased to hear others advocating for \$20.00 an hour is an understatement. It is absolutely necessary, deserved, and would allow people like me to return to the field.

I am thrilled to hear about the proposed changes such as the ones being discussed today, as these are desperately needed to ensure our most vulnerable and overlooked citizens are adequately able to meet their needs. I am very supportive of the budget initiatives outlined by Governor DeWine and Director Hauck for DODD, and strongly encourage you to include an additional investment in Ohio's DSPs.

The workforce that supports Ohio's disabled population is often hidden in the shadows alongside the people it supports, and these sorts of changes are integral to improving the lives of everyone connected to this population. I have often said in my time as an advocate for this profession that people who do this work rarely leave because the work is too difficult or unrewarding. They leave

because they are forced to by material circumstances, whether that be attached to the cost of living, schedule accessibility, or due to healthcare concerns. I never thought I would become yet another example of this fact. If a DSP who was as passionate and committed to this work as myself can walk away, it is no wonder that we find ourselves in the crisis we are in today. The benefit of veteran DSPs to a provider agency and the people they support is tremendous. The cost of replacing one is equally tremendous.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Submitted by: Joshua Peterson, Former DSP