

To Chairperson Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services;

First of all, thank you for giving me the opportunity to submit testimony that enables me to share my opinion on what should be included in the Fiscal Year 2024/2025 budget proposal (House Bill 33).

My name is Susan Koller and I live in Cincinnati. I have cerebral palsy, use an electric wheelchair and need someone to do all my activities of daily living. These activities include everything from getting me in and out of bed, helping me go to the bathroom, dressing me, preparing my food, and even something as simple as helping me get a drink of water. For help with these activities, I rely on both family members and direct care workers. However over the past few years, there has been a severe shortage of direct care workers. One of the reasons for this shortage is that direct care workers are paid extremely low wages for a very demanding job. Therefore, I implore all state legislators to include a pay increase for direct care workers in the 2024/2025 state budget.

I believe that the pay increase must be implemented across all state care systems including the developmental disability system, the Medicare and Medicaid systems, and the aging system. This pay increase would go a long way to ensuring that no vulnerable Ohioans are left without the care they need or deserve!

I cannot overstate how important direct care workers are in my life and the lives of Ohio seniors and other Ohioans with disabilities. Without these hard-working professionals many Ohioans, including myself, could not get out of bed or live the life we want. The situation became so bad for me a few years ago that I left my mom's home in Dayton and moved into a long-term facility in Cincinnati because I could not find any direct care workers to help my mom with my care.

The facility I went to was one of the best. However, I felt I could not get the individualized care I needed or have enough say in how my care was completed. To make matters worse, this facility was also dealing with the direct care worker shortage. This meant that I would often have to wait a long time to get the care I needed, and sometimes it was very basic care. For those reasons, I moved out of the facility and moved into my own apartment for the first time in my life. I now receive 21 hours of care a day. However, it has not been an easy transition. I have gone through three agencies in a very short time in order to find direct care workers who are properly trained to take care of me. There is always a part of me that is afraid I will lose these direct care workers because they will go and find better paying jobs.

I believe that increasing the pay rate for direct care workers would not only entice more individuals to enter the field, but would also solve two major problems that seniors and people with disabilities face when dealing with direct care workers. Those two problems are a high turnover rate and the lack of training for direct care workers. Obviously, people are going to leave the field if they can find higher-paying and easier jobs elsewhere. I totally understand why they leave, but it is very hard on me because as soon as I get into a good care routine with a direct care worker I often have to start all over with someone new.

Having direct care workers who are well-trained and have experience is very important for me because my care is complex and I use complicated lifts for transfers. My care cannot be done by just anyone off the street. However due to the direct care worker shortage, agencies are having to hire people off the streets without any experience just to fill open shifts. In my case, this led to serious injuries. I believe if direct care workers received a pay increase that they would be more invested in their jobs and more willing to undergo in-depth training.

The last point I want to make is that it is not just the person with the disability or the senior citizen who is receiving the care that is impacted by the direct care worker shortage. The lives of our family members are also impacted. My mom works as a substitute teacher, but she has to turn down jobs if I do not have a direct care worker because she has to stay home to take care of me. I am terrified of the day when I will not be able to rely on my mom as a backup. I really hope that together we can start to find a solution to this shortage. I believe the best way to start is by increasing the pay of all direct care workers across all systems.

Thank you again for letting me provide testimony on the subject that is so important to me, other Ohioans with disabilities, and Ohio seniors. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about my testimony. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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