

Maria Sutter
House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
Interested Party Testimony, HB 33
March 15, 2023

Chairperson Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB33.

My name is Maria Sutter. In 2004, at the age of 28, I sustained a spinal cord injury because of a bicycle accident, and I'm now a wheelchair user. Since 2006 I have been utilizing a Home and Community- Based Services waiver, which has allowed me to maintain my health, live within the community, and pursue education and employment.

Today, I would like to take a few minutes to help you understand the true lived experience of a woman striving to be her best, authentic self, but needing valuable, yet, increasingly harder to find help to do what most take for granted.

My morning starts at 7:30 AM, when my caregiver arrives to help me get dressed, partially in bed and partially in my wheelchair, a process that takes about an hour for a quadriplegic like me who requires a high level of assistance. My personal care continues in the bathroom, where my caregiver assists me to get washed up, as well helping with my hair and make-up, which can take about a half an hour. Next, we cobble together a bit of breakfast. With set up, eating and clean up, this takes about another half hour. If I don't have any appointments, I take 20-30 minutes to do some stretches and range of motion, which helps me avoid skin breakdown, respiratory illness, and muscle weakness and contracture that can all result in unwanted and avoidable hospitalizations. Finally, my aide gathers all the adaptive equipment I'll need for the day and ensures it is working, properly connected and within reach. This can include attaching a functional electrical stimulator, organizing my computer, along with my typing and dictating accessories, and locating door openers and emergency response buttons where they can be easily accessed.

At this point, I'm up to about three hours of nonstop personal care if you're keeping a tally. This isn't because my caregivers are inept, or we are doing unnecessary activities. The reality is that it takes time to properly attend to complex personal care. If you wear compression stockings, you need extra time to wrestle them on and ensure there are no wrinkles that could cause a wound, or if you use a catheter, you must be aware that it is properly placed to avoid it backing up into your bladder, which could lead to infection. Also remember, an activity that takes one step for you is always a minimum of two steps for me. For example, to apply face lotion, someone else must open the jar and hand me an applicator with lotion on it. Then I can apply it to my face myself.

The scenario I just painted is an absolute best-case, and rarely goes off without a hitch. That's just life, but it also depends on a huge level of trust and understanding with my caregivers. It used to be that finding caregivers to build long lasting relationships with took some effort, but

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there was a pool of applicants. Sadly, in the approximately 17 years since I began using direct care workers, the pool of applicants has dried up. I'm sure there are a host of reasons for this, but by far the biggest is that the money they make for the effort needed to perform the work is grossly inadequate.

The current average wage for direct care workers is only \$12.51/hour¹. For a part-time position in an Amazon Fulfillment Center, a warehouse associate makes approximately \$17.75/hour². Additionally, these types of positions also include health and retirement benefits, and often offer a sign-on bonus, none of which are available to direct care workers. I chose this example because I lost two direct care workers to the Amazon Fulfillment Center in Akron, Ohio and have no reason to believe it won't happen again. Most of the individuals who have stayed with me continue to work as caregivers because of a deep sense of compassion. Unfortunately, compassion does not pay the bills.

To not only keep direct care workers that remain committed to the field, but to entice new individuals, I respectfully ask legislators to establish a \$20/hour base pay rate for direct care workers in the 2024–2025 budget. Additionally, I ask that you create a commission to oversee long term direct care reforms, focused on monitoring long-term direct care workforce issues and issue regular reports that includes current Ohio specific data along with implementing systemic solutions.

My deepest gratitude to chairperson Carruthers and the rest of the committee for listening to my testimony today. If you have any questions regarding my testimony, please contact me at mariasutter@gmail.com.

Sincerely,
Maria Sutter

¹ PHI, Workforce Data Center (2020) available at <https://www.phinational.org/policy-research/workforce-data-center/#var=Wage+Trends&states=39>

² Amazon Jobs (2023) available at <https://hiring.amazon.com/app#/jobDetail?jobId=JOB-US-0000005742&locale=en-US&jobTitle=Amazon%20Fulfillment%20Center%20Warehouse%20Associate>