



ECHOING HILLS

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Ohio House of Representative

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Chairwoman Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the subcommittee, my name Elyssa Kerlin. I have been with Echoing Hills for three years providing daily direct care at Echoing Valley Residential Center. The region I come from is in Southwestern Ohio, but Echoing Hills has 53 locations throughout the state that helps people with developmental disabilities lead a full life and satisfying life. There are several programs throughout the organization that give this population a chance to experience life on their own terms.

At Echoing Hills, we believe that every person has the right to make their own decisions and be the author of their own story. At Echoing Valley, we have 32 possible placements and are currently providing homes for 28 individuals with a myriad of unique needs, desires, and skills. One of the biggest challenges has been maintaining a stable number of staff to provide life-altering care. For the people who rely on Echoing Hills to provide their daily care needs, the staff turnover has led to a drastic decrease in functional living skills, the inability to form and maintain meaningful relationships, and a negative impact on the mental health of so many. I have seen it firsthand.

For some, the staff at Echoing Valley are their only support system. Let me tell you about my friend, who I will call Eric, who has been at Echoing Valley for several years, and is an energetic, affectionate person who loves attending his day program, watching his favorite shows, and spending time outside in nice weather to watch flags blow in the wind.

He gravitates towards staff who get to know his likes and dislikes and work with his communication style. He can use familiar phrases, but often uses gestures to communicate his wants and needs. He is good at finding a song from his favorite Barney cartoon that expresses what he is trying to say. Recently, he had a severe health scare that landed him in the hospital multiple times. The staff who knew him well were able to pick up on behavioral changes and deficits in his memory and speech that led to him being diagnosed with a rare, potentially life-threatening blood clot. Thankfully, he is able to continue on with his life with a new medication and some closer supervision. It is very frightening to think about what could have happened if the staff around him had not known his history, typical mannerisms, and abilities so well.

When I started in 2019, there were five staff in my orienting class. There are only two who are still with the company, myself included. That is a 60% turnover rate. This is only a small sampling of the staffing crisis Echoing Hills has weathered. It is up to the frontline staff to get to know the personal care needs, behavior supports, communication styles, and likes and dislikes of each individual who calls Echoing Valley home. By raising the hourly wage of those on the frontline to \$20.00, Echoing Hills will be able to continue fulfilling its mission by investing in its workforce. This will provide peace of mind to employees like me, who stay in the field because of their passion for being a positive force in the lives of people with disabilities.

The individuals who live at Echoing Hills deserve the same opportunities that any person without a disability would have. With a wage increase, direct care staff can remain focused on

the philosophy that matters to everyone who joins the Echoing Hills family: *revolutionizing lives where people live, learn, connect, play, and worship.*

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.