

# Empowering People Inc.

House Committee on Finance and Appropriations

Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services

Testimony of Kurt A. Miller

President/CEO – Empowering People Inc.

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Chairwoman Carruthers, ranking member Liston and esteemed members of the Health and Human Services Subcommittee my name is Kurt Miller and I am the President/CEO of Empowering People Inc. I would like to thank you all for the opportunity to share my testimony. Empowering People provides services and supports to over 800 Ohioans with intellectual and developmental disabilities (DD) through residential and employment services. We currently have over 1150 wonderful employees in our organization.

We have all experienced the frustration of going out to eat and waiting longer periods of time to be seated and receive our food. We have all went into a store and seen empty shelves that are not stocked. We have seen our favorite restaurants reduce their hours or close entirely for a day. Many businesses have displayed signs that read “please be patient with our employees.” The reason provided is almost always we are “short staffed” Now, imagine waking up in your home and requiring total assistance to use the restroom, total assistance to be fed because you cannot do it yourself, or requiring medical care and being told to “be patient” because we are “short

staffed.” While it is an inconvenience to wait longer to eat, an inconvenience for shelves not to be stocked, an inconvenience to see our favorite restaurants reduce their hours, it is a health and welfare emergency to not have your basic health needs met. Unfortunately, this is the reality in the DD system due to the existing workforce crisis.

I would like to start by expressing my sincere gratitude for Governor DeWine’s recognition of the workforce crisis in the DD system and the inclusion of additional funding in his budget. However, the investment being proposed in Governor DeWine’s budget will not stabilize our agency or in my opinion the DD system. The job market is more competitive than ever and the DD system is significantly trailing other occupations in starting wage. The workforce emergency the DD field is facing is the single greatest threat to our system. The ability to recruit and retain employees is more difficult than ever. The state operated centers recently increased their starting wage to over \$20/hour to become competitive in today’s job market while the statewide average wage for private providers hovers around \$14. Absent a substantial investment to provide a competitive wage for all providers I fear that our most vulnerable Ohio citizens will be left without the vital services and support they require to ensure their health and welfare.

As you know all too well, we are facing the worst workforce crisis our system has ever seen. The workforce crisis forced our agency to close a 32 bed ICF/IID which resulted in the relocation of 22 residents to unfamiliar locations and for some moving away from family and friends. Several of the residents lived in that home for more than 20 years. Imagine, having to leave a place that has been your home for more than 20 years with familiar faces to move into a new location where you do not know anyone while requiring total assistance for all care. Unfortunately, this situation is becoming all too common in our system. The affect these closures

have on Ohioans with DD and their families is immense. Our system is serving less people and losing capacity almost daily, leaving families and aging caregivers to fend for themselves.

While I could provide numerous examples of how this closure negatively impacted the people who were forced to move I would like to share the story of "Ted." Ted was a resident of the home for over 10 years. Following the closure of the home Ted moved to another ICF/IID. He was there for a stabilization stay of 30 days following the placement of a feeding tube. Once the wound healed Ted moved into an I/O waiver home. While there his health declined and he was transferred to a nursing home. The stay at the nursing home resulted in Ted developing numerous bed sores and he now requires a trach to assist with breathing. Ted has recently been transferred back to an ICF Empowering People operates. Ted has suffered a significant decline in quality of life and independence that we are working to stabilize. These changes all occurred in 2 short years. One cannot help but wonder if Ted was able to remain at the place he called home would he have experienced the significant regression he is now?

The level of service and support that direct support professionals provide along with the responsibility they accept is enormous. There are very few professions that require such a dedication to detail and where a simple oversight can have dire consequences. I struggle to identify even one other occupation that entails such immense responsibility with an average wage of \$14.00.

It is our moral obligation to stabilize the DD system by addressing the workforce crisis. Providers cannot close early or shut down for a day because the people we serve and support need care 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Providers are 100% reliant on Medicaid funding to increase wages for our employees and I implore you to work with us to solve this crisis before it is too late. We have an opportunity to either be proactive and assist Ohioans with disabilities

thrive or be reactive and likely be helping Ohioans with disabilities simply survive. The choice is clear. Thank you again so much for your time.

Respectfully,

Kurt A. Miller, President/CEO  
Empowering People Inc.