

Jackie Martin

House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services  
Interested Party, HB 33  
March 22, 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 HB 33 and the issue of the Direct Support Professionals (DSP) Workforce Crisis.

My name is Jackie Martin. I live in Hilliard, Franklin County, and am the mother of Justin Martin, who provided testimony to you earlier today.

I have listened to the testimony before your subcommittee over the past several weeks. I'd like to add some context and lived experience to the phrases "searching for DSPs" and "unable to find DSPs", in case you are wondering what that process is. My son and I have a couple decades of experience in searching for DSPs, in different capacities, depending on where he was in his life journey. But, for context, I'd like to tell you about our "search" experience since January. When a person with a disability served by the county board needs a DSP, their county board caseworker will tell them to go to the DODD website and search the Provider Database. This database contains all certified DODD providers – DSPs, including agencies and Independent Providers. One can narrow their search for a specific service, for example, non-medical transportation or Homemaker Personal Care (HPC), or by county or zip code.

In January, when Justin began his teaching job we embarked, once again, on the DSP search. We have not had a DSP for 3 years. We went to the DODD Provider Database and strategically narrowed our search to those providers living in Hilliard and bordering communities, Upper Arlington, Dublin, Galloway. And we narrowed it further to only Independent Providers – so those who do not work for an agency. This resulted in 69 names. We sent out individual detailed emails describing the services Justin needed, the days and the times, both in the immediate short-term, as well as the long-term (when he would be able to move in to his own apartment, and thereby needing more support.)

Over the next couple of weeks, we received 24 responses to those 69 emails. Zero responded "yes, I can provide those services – let's talk." Zero responded with even a "maybe". All 24 responses indicated "No, I am no longer providing services" or "No, I only provide services to a family member."

Concurrent to working the state DODD Provider Database search process, we worked with the Franklin County Board of DD and its "Connector Program", a program designed to connect DSPs with individuals who need services. That process is the staff person emails to the County's provider list a description of the services needed. If a provider – DSP – is interested and able, they submit a contact form to the county staff person. The staff person then forwards the information on to the individual or family member for them to make the connection with the potential DSP. Our "search" process with the County Board Connector Program resulted in 5 responses. One was an Independent Provider and the other 4 were agencies.

After multiple attempts by us via phone calls and emails, we received no response from the Independent Provider. We took her off our list. One of the agencies, who had replied to the county board that they could provide wheelchair transportation, revealed to us that, in fact, they did not have a

wheelchair accessible van. We took them off our list. The remaining three agencies, upon talking to them, revealed that, in fact, they didn't actually have the staff to provide the services and that they would have to find someone. That's the exact same boat we are in and we would much rather be in control of who we 'find', than some random agency.

So, we are left with trying to figure out what to do next. I suppose we could expand our reach and send 69 more emails out. But, we have not the time nor the energy to spend on something that our experience in the past 2 ½ months, as well as the past 3 years, tells us we can be quite certain the result will be the same – no DSPs. My husband and I are working full-time jobs as well as doing the support care for Justin, so that he can work a full-time job.

I spend countless time thinking about what more can I do. What can I try next?

I have concluded that there is nothing more that I can do.

As parents, we tell our children that they are in control of their own destiny; their own futures. We guide them throughout their young lives and into adulthood about what that means – controlling their own destiny. Attend school, do your homework, respect your teachers and classmates, be engaged in your school and in your community, learn, go to college or vocational training, and apply yourself. Then you'll get a good job, earn enough money to support yourself, get your first apartment, your first car. "It's all in your own hands", we tell them, and the decisions they make will determine their future. And for most of us, that's all true. But for my son, Justin, his future – his destiny – the trajectory of his life - lies squarely in your hands, and the hands of your colleagues in the Ohio Legislature. For only you can increase the wage of Ohio's DSPs and therefore solve the Ohio DSP Workforce Crisis. He needs DSPs to have a life, to have a future, to continue teaching English to 10<sup>th</sup> graders.

I listened to the OOD Director testify before this Committee about the historic investment that the Governor's proposed budget has within the Director's department. A good portion of that investment is for students with disabilities to go to college or get vocational training, so that they are better positioned to be employed. And while I would never advocate against funding toward programs that support people with disabilities I worry about these enhanced OOD programs for students with disabilities who most likely also need DSPs in order to go to college, to get that vocational training, to ultimately get that job. I worry that the state will make this historic investment, but not equally investing in solving the DSP workforce crisis. I worry that in two years or four years, the OOD Director and other disability advocates will be before you again saying "thank you for that investment, but now we have this group of young people who have received a college education or vocational training that we paid for, but they are still not able to secure that job because there are no DSPs to help them get out of their home in the morning to go to work – we didn't invest in DSPs and the crisis is worse than it was 2 years ago. "

I respectfully request that you support an increase in the hourly rate of DSPs to \$20. The issue and the reason we are in a crisis, are simple to me. The pay rate for DSPs is \$13.00/hour, and no benefits. That wage is not a livable wage. People cannot pay rent or mortgage, put food on their table, put gas in their cars, pay for health insurance and lights and heat in their homes for that wage. So, they are not staying nor entering the DSP workforce. But, remember, not having a DSP workforce does not eliminate the absolute need for DSPs. People with disabilities still need DSPs – they still need to get out of bed, use the bathroom, take a shower, get dressed, get to a job.

So much is inter-related, but the investment in the DSP workforce seems to me to be almost the single most important thing that needs to be solved if we, the state of Ohio, can truly say we are an “inclusive state”.

If we are going to proudly state that we value people with disabilities, then we must value the people who support them. This is a national crisis, not just Ohio. My son and family also experienced this crisis while trying to secure DSPs in Nashville, Tennessee 1 ½ years ago when my son was to begin the second year of his two-year Master’s Program at Vanderbilt University. We thought we would have no problem finding DSPs in a major city. After 5 months and literally hundreds of emails and phone calls, we were only able to secure one person, for one overnight shift, one day a week. Ohio could be a national leader in solving this crisis by increasing the hourly rate of DSPs to \$20/hour.

I don’t envy the decisions you and your colleagues have to make regarding Ohio’s state budget; I know they are difficult decisions. But, as you deliberate over these decisions, I ask that you remember my son, Justin, and that you think about how his future, his life, depends on the decisions that you make about the DSP Workforce Crisis. I ask that you remember the thousands of Ohioans who rely on DSPs to live and to have a future.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you today. I am happy to answer questions now or even to meet with you to share our experiences through many years of navigating the systems of support for people with disabilities.