

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, my thanks to all of you for hearing so many voices of testimony and concern. My name is Tony Thomas, I am Executive Director of Welcome House in Cleveland, OH. We have 43 group homes, 2 apartment buildings, and 20 persons with IDD living in their own apartments or condos. We serve 205 people with developmental disabilities. We have 300 staff but, that number is now 100 staff short of where it needs to be. When I testified in the House Finance Committee just a few weeks ago we were down 80 staff.

Since my last testimony in the Ohio House we have lost another 20 staff persons. At the beginning of the pandemic, we had over 400 staff supporting the 205 people served. We have not been able to climb out of that staff deficit since the fall of 2021. And our yearly agency budget just experiences deficit after deficit.

I have been Executive Director since 1999 at my agency. I have never, ever seen the kind of staff shortage like this at our agency. It has left me feeling very anxious about the future of our agency, and the overall health and well-being of our current staff, clients, and their families. My anxiety comes to me at various times. And when it hits me, I feel the most anxiety in what our future will be. So, true to my clinical background I am sharing this anxiety with all of you today. The anxious question I ask myself is, “have done enough to help both our clients and staff.”

We have numerous current staff who are working excessive amounts of overtime. In 2022 we had over \$500,000 in overtime alone. That will lead to staff burnout, it already has, and while some staff enjoy the extra money that comes with overtime from this pandemic in the short term, the excessive hours needed to meet client needs have led to some long-time staff leaving our field. It has also led to a feeling of hopelessness in many who have stayed and threatens our ability to provide high

quality care that Welcome House has traditionally provided.

But I want to address some concerns and questions that were brought up during earlier Senate Medicaid Committee hearings and in meetings with other Senate members. There has been concern about boosting our salaries over another health care field would create an imbalance in recruitment and that staff from nursing homes and assisted living centers would leave those fields and get jobs with us. In the Welcome House experience, this happens very minimally or not at all. When staff come to us from other health and human service roles, they typically come from other developmental disability service providers.

We lose staff to Target, Walmart, and Amazon who all now pay higher salaries than most human service agencies who hire Direct Support Professionals (DSP's). And all our staff work in jobs with many more complex demands and higher responsibilities.

They deserve more than just a salary increase, they deserve our gratitude and sincere thanks.

The other item to address today is that we need to address two key components of frontline staff salaries. We need to make the **competitive** to current labor standards and we need to be **comparable** with other for-profit businesses.

The labor market is shrinking in our state, we know that, and we need to address this labor shortage with other strategies that are being discussed and considered as we speak. But we must first start with salaries that will give frontline workers in the DD field a chance to make it out of poverty, pay for reliable transportation, or feed their family.

I wanted to first thank Governor DeWine and DD Director Kim Hauck for their initial investment in our DD field and historic funding levels to stabilize our staffing levels. We took their recommendation to the Ohio House and its Finance Committee and now I want to thank Chairman Edwards, Vice Chair LaRue and ranking member Sweeney for their

second historic investment in our frontline staff salaries and our future as social service agencies serving the neediest of Ohio's citizens.

It's time to take a stand and make a statement on the developmental disabilities field in our state. The Governor and the House have begun this conversation off to a great start. We hope Ohio Senators can do the same!!

With Gratitude,

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