

Health and Human Services Subcommittee
March 23, 2023

Matt Lehner, Heinzerling Community Resident Parent
House Bill 33 Proponent Testimony

Chairwoman Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the Health and Human Services Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide my testimony today.

My name is Matt Lehner and my son, Noah, age 20 has been a resident at Heinzerling Community his entire life. I am here today to testify in support of the increased funding for direct service providers caring for individuals with developmental disabilities like my son.

Our journey with Noah, like many first time parents, started with many questions, but as the days and weeks passed, we were left with a limited number of answers, including what type of long-term care he would need. I can remember at this time trying to conceptualize if the NICU would be our new home, given the level of care he needed. Weeks later in a meeting with Noah's medical team I remember a quiet voice emerging and saying they were familiar with The Heinzerling Foundation, as it was known at the time, and how they provide specialized, long-term care for people with profound developmental and physical disabilities. My heart left my throat, where it had been for the weeks prior, and fell back into my chest knowing that there was a viable option available, in Columbus nonetheless.

Fast forward twenty years later and Noah is leading a successful, dignified life with help from the dedicated staff at Heinzerling, namely the direct care associates or DCAs. While relying on them for nearly every aspect of his day, he has managed to develop discerning tastes and preferences for things like heavy metal bands like Metallica, playing the moroccos and delivering the biggest smiles that light up any room he is in. These are small things, but no less of a miracle considering the unknown from 20 years ago.

This quality of life is possible due in large part to the DCAs at Heinzerling and it is my privilege to testify on their behalf in hopes of increasing the funding to support higher wages. The past several years have brought meaningful discussion and change on a number of economic issues, including pay, and I hope this will be a successful endeavor. By increasing the compensation for these service providers, we would not only be establishing pay that is commensurate with the work they are doing, but also move closer to recognizing the meaningful impact they have on individuals with disabilities. The enhanced wage would also allow for much needed recruitment into this field of service. The unfortunate reality is that the present salary can prove to be too high of a barrier to overcome, causing otherwise excellent caregivers to look at alternative employment that offers better pay. Additionally, the sad irony in this is that the shortage of workers in

skilled caregiving is coming at a time where demand for these services have not changed or even increased, causing families to remain in limbo, much like we did before finding Heinzerling.

I urge you to vote for adopting a higher starting wage for direct service providers so individuals like my son can also lead a fulfilling life, like many of us in this room. I am happy to answer any question the committee has, but first I will leave you with this. It is commonly accepted that the true measure of any society can be found with how it treats its most vulnerable members and by extension, those that care for those vulnerable members. This is our opportunity to provide that measurement.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and thank you for your consideration of additional funding for DD services. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.