

Senate Finance Committee

Testimony of Tawanah S Key, Owner & Home Operator of Achievements for Independence Adult Care Facilities in Cuyahoga County May 25, 2023

Chairman Dolan, and members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee, My name is Tawanah Key. I am the Owner/Operator of two State licensed Class 2 Facilities in Cuyahoga County.

I serve and care for the Mental Health demographic. I consider myself a very good Home Operator but it's not easy at all. Although leadership and problem resolution come naturally to me I still get derailed along my journey and efforts to run a good business. We never know what challenges we will face until they arise and more often than not those issues have economically impactful consequences.

Our clients suffer from PTSD, Schizophrenia, Borderline Personality Disorders, Bipolar disorder and more just to name a few. The behaviors of our Demographic keep us on our toes 24 hours per day without fail. We NEVER get a break. We don't get much sleep. And most times an account reflecting a positive balance at the close of the month ...NEVER HAPPENS.

We have to self motivate ourselves so that our clients remain healthy and stable with limited support from the systems that claim to back us.. Inflation and the lack of personal care resources for the work that we do is forcing our homes to close. If I didn't have other sources of income my homes would be closed as well. I certainly can't continue to operate under the current circumstances. If it wasn't for COVID my businesses would have closed in April if 2020. Some Emergency grant funding from the State put a bandaid on things. I carefully & strategically made the best use of those dollars to improve my Facilities. In hindsight it was a blessing and a curse. It gave me hope in an unrealistic set of circumstances. Now I'm back to management with more debits than credits and using money from my other sources of income that I won't be able to continue past this fall.

The fact that no increase has been made to the RSS program in 7 years is pretty degrading to say the least. When you compare the per diem rate of a Mental Health client in a group home vs the same clients in MRDD homes their per diem rate skyrockets for the exact same service provisions. That's a tremendous disservice to our community as a whole. Our clients families already throw them away. Strangers pass judgment and don't know our clients had stories prior to succumbing to illness. Their personal needs matter just as much if not more. SEVEN whole YEARS without an increase?? We have to change this now. Especially when you look at HB-33 and MRDD is still slated to receive a 20% increase. WHY is the budget so unbalanced? The MRDD clients per diem is already 75% higher than ours.

This statement seemed eyebrow raising to Senator Reineke during our appointment the day after Advocacy Day. He respects and appreciates NAMI and it's cause and said he was certainly willing to take a closer look at my concerns. I'm asking you to keep your promise Senator Reineke.

Senator & Chair Matt Dolan...May I ask that you consider a sharing of the 20% increase slated for the MRDD population? Mental Health needs more flexibility that they can afford to share with us...

In BOTH settings we offer three meals per day, medication management, own or rent the homes, pay excessively used utilities, purchase toiletries, launder clothing and bedding weekly, have social engagement, update their loved ones if they have any. If they don't we have to be extensions of their families. Clean the refrigerators they have spills in daily. Sanitize the bathrooms daily, offer supervision safety, write up observation reports for random review by the State. These duties are the same in both settings.

But in the Mental Health demographic those duties intensify. Our clients behaviors require much more of our personal & analytical evaluation trying to undo things that most people take for granted. We have to find the dishes they hide between their mattresses & box springs. We aren't allowed to use paper goods. However we have to purchase new drinking glasses & eating utensils monthly because they're thrown right in the trash like an empty potato chip bag. We aren't We have to play Detective to locate undesirable matters in BEDROOMS because someone in a fit of anger decided between the new comforter and sheet was a better location for a smelly deposit. Well who physically manages this?? ME of course. I have to deescalate mental breaks like a Counselor or Negotiator would. At least until police or an Ems unit arrives because they can't hear anyone else at an irrational moment. No one except their constant & LOYAL care giver. Oftentimes that call comes in the middle of the night. I can't afford to hire a staff person to sleep there at night so that means I have to get out of the bed I'm trying to recover in after a long day of work with no outside support.

Home Operators are overwhelmed & have been underappreciated for the services they provide. So why doesn't the money match the services? Why has it taken 7 years to even consider an increase? We're only asking for \$53 per day instead of ONLY \$36.00 per day of which the State only forwards \$18 of those dollars. Our clients use their checks for the balance.

The average stipend for an infant child under the Supervision of a licensed daycare facility is more than our request. Children aren't cared for for TWENTY FOUR HOURS and get \$60. P.D. In addition, daycare providers get reimbursement stipends for food which we are NOT eligible. In essence our Demographic of Operators that care for this population live under a cloudy stigma that says "Those houses aren't fit for a Dog to live in". Well the news I came to deliver today is that it's not because those Operators do not have a heart for what they do. It's not because they aren't working. It's because these Operators are only ONE HUMAN BEING that can't afford to hire help. Most Operators are baby boomers that have been forced to run their businesses alone. Those are sinfully phasing out. They were once small outfits who opened their personal homes to Foster our clients as a way to supplement their incomes. Since they were governed by the State. They were slowly forced to become business owners with more red tape & administrative duties distracting them from the high performance that previously came naturally to them as caregivers. Now these Veteran Operators cry for help from Operators like myself when they used to be our Pilar's. New ORC's, computers, and elevated standards, that

changed overnight from 4 pages to 65 pages gut punched our ill prepared seniors & Veteran caregivers and put them out of business as well.

The new school Operators don't last long in this industry because they thought \$1100 per month per person sounded like a lot of money. Next thing we know that new house operator closed 6 months later. Totally ill prepared for the daily struggles operators face on the front lines everyday.

Where is the time to check Jane's closet to figure out what that smell is? Jane rides the bus everyday and garbage picks along her route. When she returns she stuffs her fun finds in concealed spaces that at some point an Operator has to find the time to sort through. Might be banana peelings she found value in. That might explain why the Operator can't seem to get rid of the fruit flies everyone is complaining about. Might be a pillow that someone threw out containing bed bugs. "Well it was really PRETTY Ms Tawanah" she says. Won't make sense in your mind but Jane's rationale is not like ours. I have to have empathy for Jane's decisions and correct her from a place of love although she just placed my entire environment at risk. In fact might repeat the exact same thing next week..What about the fact that I'm exterminating yet AGAIN. Do you know what that bill looks like?

Many Operators are too ashamed to seek help when the result of the occurrence may reflect upon them. So due to pride & embarrassment these issues grow beyond their ability to manage. They already can't pay themselves for the long & extensive hours spent. So they end up with bug infested facilities. Our clients don't deserve to live like that.

In addition when our clients need hospitalization for stabilization, the Hospitals aren't truly doing it. Insurance pays for a 3 day overnight stay. That's not enough time to monitor & stabilize an individual who's having a manic episode. So they end up right back in our care. Punching holes through the same walls we just fixed 2 weeks prior. Next thing you know a paranoid client thought they heard a space invader hiding in the kitchen cabinets so they ripped off the doors. We have above normal wear & tear on our homes. Several Home Operators even have Contractor liens on Homes that they own & have inherited in their families. This is how poorly we are doing.

Our duties, roles, and responsibilities easily exceed EVERY one of the following: MRDD, Vets, Recovery, Childcare, and Skilled Nursing. We need more flexibility for our care management and our clients' destruction. Lastly, has anyone considered the Mental Health of the exhausted Home Operators in your communities?

Had you heard about Home Operator suicides?

My mortgage payment is \$850.00 per month. That's \$28 per day without considering the utility usage costs. Most homes can only house up to 5 people but most maintain a census of 2 to 3 residents at one time. Those other 2 beds are typically a revolving door of instability. Leaving the home Operators with extremely limited resources and cutting corners people judge them for.

They don't have time to clip coupons. They can't afford to shop in bulk. Our State Surveyors frown upon us using food pantries to help us get by.

The systems that are in place are falling apart right under your nose because the people are embarrassed & ashamed. Now that the Senate has been placed on notice we need the Finance Committee to be our heroes. More crime, more homelessness, and more Death should be a realistic expectation in the State we are in. We need this finance committee to lock hands with our Governor Mike Dewain who included an increase for personal care in his as introduced budget. My Colleagues and I are asking you to give great consideration to restoring it. We know it won't be easy but it's necessary. Please take the time to figure out how to trim some fat off of something else. We are in desperate need of monthly support.

Thanks in advance

Respectfully,
Team Lead for voices of Home Operators

Tawanah Key ico/
Achievements for Independence I & II
(216) 245-5474

As a unit we represent Franklin, Trumbull, Hamilton, & Cuyahoga Counties