

Alexia Kemerling, American Association of People with Disabilities
Interested Party Testimony, House Bill 33
Senate Finance Committee
June 8, 2023

Chairman Dolan, Vicechairman Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes and members of the Senate Finance Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on HB 33. My name is Alexia Kemerling and I work with the American Association of People with Disabilities.

I am testifying on the need for a \$20/hr base wage for direct care workers, direct support professionals, and nurses who provide home and community based services (HCBS) through waivers under the Ohio Departments of Medicaid, Aging, and Developmental Disabilities (ODM, ODA, DODD).

I am grateful that the Ohio legislature has:

- 1) Made historic increases to the wages of direct support professionals (DSP) who serve individuals under the Department of Developmental Disabilities.
- 2) Acknowledged that competitive wages are crucial for the stability of this essential workforce.
- 3) Created a Home and Community-Based Services Direct Care Worker Wages Task Force.

Thank you.

However, there are still a few actions that the Senate needs to take. First, the language in Section 751.20, 751.21 needs to be edited to include a requirement that the wage task force include people who receive services on all three waiver systems – ODM, ODA, DODD. Without the direct input of people with lived experience, the state will not be successful in creating meaningful, sustainable change.

Second, I want to remind you that DSPs are not the only people doing this work and the DD system is not the only system in dire need of support. Nurses and direct care workers provide essential care to people with disabilities and older adults under ODM and ODA, too.

Wage increases for the DD system are important, but not enough. Without \$20/hr base pay across all three systems, there will not be equity. Ohioans will continue to struggle.

We will be forced to compete against each other for resources to survive, instead of working together to make our state the best home it can be.

I know that you and your colleagues have heard from hundreds of disabled Ohioans and older adults impacted by the direct care workforce crisis.

Perhaps, you are tired of hearing about this issue. I can assure you our community is exhausted, too.

Ohioans are exhausted from countless hours spent searching for care, exhausted from sacrificing their well-being, time, and personal finances to travel to the statehouse to beg for support so they can live in the community. Yet, our community keeps showing up because that's how important this is.

Several of my mentors, who have helped me grow as a professional in my career, are served under the ODM waiver. A number of my friends and colleagues are served under the ODM and ODA waivers.

If they did not have care workers and nurses they need to live in their own homes and work and advocate and mentor, I may not have ever gotten to meet them. And I can assure you, my life would be drastically different. I would be different. Our state would be different without their work as professionals, the taxes they pay as homeowners, the innumerable ways they contribute to their communities every single day.

And over the past year, I have watched those same people lose caregivers due to issues of pay. They have confided in me that they are showing up to our meetings having not slept or eaten or bathed for days because of lack of care. And it takes a toll.

Including language in our budget that creates \$20/hr base wages for direct care workers, support professionals, and nurses that provide HCBS services under ODM, ODA, and DODD should be a no-brainer decision based solely on the fact that Ohioans have the right to receive services in their home and live in the community, and in order to do that, they need workers, and to have workers, those workers need to be paid livable wages.

But if thinking of each individual human's rights isn't enough for you, then I invite you to zoom out with me. If thousands of Ohioans continue to be unable to receive adequate care due to low wages and lack of benefits from direct care, nursing, and direct support professionals, then they will be forced into institutions and forced to leave their homes, jobs, and communities.

I am not exaggerating when I tell you that this is not their individual loss. It is our state's collective loss, and it will have disastrous effects on our workforce, our economy, and our community.

I urge you to take two actions today:

- 1) Include \$20/hr base pay for workers serving individuals on waivers through all HCBS systems – ODM, ODA, and DODD
- 2) Include language that requires that the Home and Community-Based Services Direct Care Worker Wages Task Force include individuals receiving services on waivers through all HCBS systems – ODM, ODA, DODD

Thank you.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for further information.

Alexia Kemerling
akemerling@aapd.com, 419-632-4621