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Disability Advocates Urge Senate To Retain Provider Rate Hike

Groups that offer care for people with developmental disabilities called on the upper chamber Wednesday to keep the House's increase in reimbursement rates for direct support professionals.

Witnesses told the Senate Finance Committee that maintaining rates supporting a \$13-per-hour salary for such workers as proposed in the House-passed budget (**HB 166**) would help stem the tide of employees leaving the field.

Tony Thomas, executive director of group home operator Welcome House, said **Gov. Mike DeWine** and the House's proposed reimbursement boost represents "an unprecedented investment in services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities."

He said the need for a higher reimbursement rate is evident in the story of Welcome House, which employs 375 DSPs.

"We are also on pace this year to expend over \$300,000 in overtime to cover open hours," Mr. Thomas said. "The weekly open hours and the amount of overtime expended are all record setting amounts due to the worst staffing crisis we have seen since we started our first home in 1981."

Megan Nachtwey, Welcome House's associate executive director, said solving the "staffing crisis" will not be possible without a wage boost for DSPs.

"We just don't have the staff coming to us to be hired," she said.

Sen. Nickie Antonio (D-Lakewood) said the situation described by the witnesses "sounds like a crisis on some levels for sure." She asked if the rate hike alone could attract enough employees to alleviate the problem.

Mr. Thomas said he believes higher reimbursement rates would improve the situation. He said staffers leaving for better-paying jobs in food service and retail have told him they would have stayed in the field if better wages were a possibility.

Gary Tonks, CEO of the ARC of Ohio, said many DSPs "currently make such a low wage they often qualify for government assistance."

"An average wage of \$13, as proposed in the amended budget, will provide at least an incentive for our direct care staff to continue to support our loved ones," he said. "Many have never seen an increase in salary other than that required by increases in the minimum wage.

"The proposed increase lets them know that they have not been forgotten and reinforces our belief that, yes, we as Ohioans do value you," he said.

Patricia Otter, president and CEO of United Cerebral Palsy of Greater Cleveland, said the proposed investment is one of the best steps the legislature could take to improve the lives of people with disabilities.

"Automatic doors and ramps are a necessity to many people with disabilities," she said. "However, their impact pales in comparison to that of the direct support professionals who impact their quality of life on a daily basis."

Barbara Riley, chair of the Ohio Aging Advocacy Coalition asked for the Senate to also boost reimbursement rates for direct care workers at least to the levels proposed for disability DSPs. She said the senior care sector also is seeing a "crisis" regarding employment.

"This results in serious access issues as we lose the very agencies we need in underserved areas; as worker turnover results in less continuity of care and in a loss of our ability to become comfortable with the people who are performing our most intimate care; and as workers flee to McDonalds for higher wages and leave us either without care or without consistent caregivers," she said in prepared testimony.