



Choices In Community Living, Inc.

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Stephen McHugh, Esq. Chairman Burke, Ranking Member Cafaro and Members of the Senate Medicaid Committee:
President

Janet Peasant
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My name is Tom Weaver and I am Executive Director of Choices in Community Living. Choices provides residential, day programs and non-medical transportation services for over 250 people in Preble, Montgomery, Clark and Madison County and employees over 285 people. It is an important and valuable service we provide for those 250 individuals and the community; we are the hands and feet, the smiles, the problem solvers, the caring and committed people who daily guide and assist individuals with developmental disabilities to build safe, healthy and meaningful lives in their communities.

I am here today to request that the Ohio Senate fully fund the Governor's developmental disabilities funding initiatives in HB 64 as introduced. HB 64 as introduced includes a significant investment of new state monies into our system for the first time in over a generation. It is a comprehensive, finely interwoven approach to many of our system's immediate needs and is responsive in its approach to both the external and internal pressures our system currently faces.

I would like to touch briefly on one issue of particular importance. For those of us responsible for providing service on a daily basis, the single most critical issue we face is recruiting and retaining a quality workforce. We could easily fill this entire room and into the lobby with those who would explain in earnest the day to day challenges involved. We know without question that the single biggest challenge facing Ohio's DD system is our direct care workforce.

Of course, workforce challenges are not unique to developmental disabilities. Aetna led the way by announcing that pay was a critical factor in attracting and nurturing a strong workforce. Wal-Mart has made front page national news explaining its challenges and response. Likewise McDonalds has made headlines as its workers complain of low wages. But if I may, and in all due respect to Wal-Mart and McDonalds, running a cash register compares little to the responsibilities and expectations we place on direct care staff and, quite candidly, the consequences of mistakes. Yet the wages we pay are comparable and sometimes even less.

We don't have holidays in the provision of direct service. Over 50% of our staff work more than one job and over 20% are eligible for and benefit from public assistance programs such as food stamps, housing subsidy or health care subsidy. They don't want to be on these programs and would gladly exchange their subsidy for a wage increase. The lack of an available and willing workforce puts more pressure on existing staff to work overtime

resulting in the inevitable burnout and creating the obvious Catch-22. Our direct care vacancy rates are larger than we have ever seen. When we are asked to provide new services for the first time we are beginning to say NO because we don't believe we will be able to hire the staff to provide the service.

Yet don't let this distract from the real commitment and passion that we see on a regular basis. Let me share a quick story that speaks to the commitment of my staff: Bill was a man with developmental disability who had moved about a lot in his life. His early life was home with his family before being placed at Columbus Developmental Center and then back to the Dayton area which is when we got to know him. For over 10 years he shared a home with 3 other men. He was a fun loving guy whom we learned to love and respect even though he struggled in building close and trusting relationships with others, which often times led to trouble with roommates and others. But our staff always had an encouraging word or provided the support he needed to help him know he was loved and respected. When he was diagnosed with stage 4 liver cancer he worried greatly as would anyone. Our staff were there to comfort him, to coordinate the doctor visits and other medical care, to provide the needed support for diet, to ensure he took his medication properly, to provide ongoing feedback to his medical team, to help him stay connected to his remaining family and friends, to help him through the chemo treatments, and to provide him comfort through sleepless nights and days of nausea and pain. As he approached the end of his life he asked if he could stay home and not be sent away. Without question our staff all supported that decision and were with him at his bedside, holding his hand, giving him their love as he passed. They fought alongside him as he struggled to keep his life and grieved when they lost someone they loved.

This is important, difficult and consuming work, and for this, staff earn less than if they worked at a big box store.

HB 64 as introduced included in its developmental disabilities funding initiatives a 6% rate increase targeted for direct care wages in their home and community based waivers. This is the first time an administration has identified and recognized that workforce is a critical issue that needs to be addressed. A 6% increase will not prove a complete panacea to this issue, but is welcomed and appreciated and will prove helpful and impactful.

While I have talked in large measure about our workforce challenges I want to be clear that the new funding in the budget is a package and needs to be addressed as such. The initiatives are interconnected and are intended to respond to systemic needs as a whole.

Unfortunately, Am. Sub. HB 64 as passed by the House resulted in a significant funding cut due to LSC projections. This puts in jeopardy the Governor's new funding initiatives including the 6% rate increase. Please vote to restore funding for the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities to the as introduced levels. Thank you.