



*A recent NASP survey of Developmental Disability (DD) service providers across the state showed that we are currently **30% short of critical direct support staff** (September, 2021) - and that is after eliminating all non-essential services. DD services ensure the health and safety of our communities' most vulnerable residents. Every town in every county has residents in need of these services and supports.*

*Unlike non-essential industries who can adjust their wages, pricing, or hours to mitigate staff shortages, DD providers cannot. We cannot close our doors, yet cannot offer the competitive wages necessary to attract critical staff without a change in the rates set by the State.*

*Residential managers understand the impact and increased risks this staffing crisis has on the communities we serve better than anyone. They are on the frontline 24/7 relentlessly plugging holes in the dam - but the flood is overwhelming. Relief is desperately and immediately needed. While financial data provides all the evidence necessary to support this claim, these testimonials from residential managers, direct support professionals (DSPs), and healthcare staff from across the state will remove any lingering doubt.*

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"I am a Registered Nurse who works at a facility that cares for our most vulnerable population. I have the privilege of directing and monitoring the care for adults with mental and physical disabilities. I am appalled by the lack of support our State-funded facility receives to care for our individuals. We are constantly working short staffed and have to rely on our staff to put in mandatory overtime time and time again. There is no wonder we have a huge staff turnover and they leave to go elsewhere that pays an actual living wage. With our budget we can only offer \$11/hour starting wage - which is not a wage you or I could live with, but yet we expect staff to do this with a smile. It's not realistic with the cost of living and increase of prices due to the pandemic. It is a shame that our fine state puts such a disregard on the well-being of a human life, yet you can go to any fast food establishment and make more than what our facility is granted to give. This in turn puts our individuals at risk and they may not be receiving the care that they deserve.

**How do you propose we continue to give adequate care with inadequate staff?** How would you feel if this was your loved ones? I beg of you to be the change. You can make a difference in the lives of these individuals' health and well-being. Please give us the funding we need to retain good staff so our individuals get the care they deserve."

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"Let me start by telling you a little bit about a few of the DSPs I supervise because they're simply incredible. One of my DSPs is a mom of three children. Her husband is currently overseas serving. She picks up extra shifts to help while her teenager watches her toddler. She still must maintain her home, have her kid's morning school routine in place with lunches made, and make sure laundry is done before she can even plop down in her bed. Another DSP just lost two family members to COVID-19 after being extremely sick and in the hospital with the same diagnosis himself. He came back to work after his quarantine and continued working while his mom and his aunt were on ventilators in the hospital. He took less than a week off work because he didn't want to weigh the rest of his team down. One of them has been working on average over 80 hours *per week* for months on end, and despite beginning to feel burn-out, feels obligated to help to ensure the individuals she supports receive the absolute best care. She is head of a large household, raises her nieces/nephews, and sacrifices her weekly family night on a regular basis because of staffing shortages. Another is a young mom to a kindergarten son and pregnant. She works in a group home with individuals with extremely high needs and often have aggressive behaviors. She sends her son off to school, hugs him and

tells him to have a great day - but he was in bed two hours before she got home because she picked up *fourteen* evening shifts this month to cover for another DSP who lost their battle to mental health.

And yes, one of our team members lost their battle to mental health issues last week. May he rest in peace. He was an amazing DSP, but he struggled with attendance issues and sometimes needed a day off that I couldn't offer him because I simply had no coverage. But you couldn't tell on shift because everybody was laughing if he was around.

This is not even a quarter of the DSP's I supervise. And my team is only one tiny piece to this puzzle.

Now, let me tell you a little about myself: I'm a single mom with a supportive system. I have two elementary school aged boys with my ex-husband. We co-parent well and he's flexible with switching up schedules and school pick up when I must last minute cover shifts. I'm a foster parent to my childhood best friend's daughter and in the process of adopting her. She has a lot of trauma and gets suspended from daycare on a regular basis and needs time and attention that I can't always give her. I enjoy reading but I don't remember the last time I finished a book. I often joke around and tell people I live at work and visit my house sometimes, but they laugh because they understand. I've been with my agency for over two years now. Early 2020, I was the DSP working 80 plus hours a week while my family and friends tucked my babies into bed. My passion for working with this population with developmental disabilities comes from believing they deserve the absolute best.

**Getting results requires change, and something needs to change.** We work with vulnerable populations who require constant supervision. We are in the middle of a pandemic with no end in sight. We work extra to compensate for the shortage and so the rest of the team isn't taking all the burden and forget to or flat out skip self-care, putting ourselves on the back burner. We can't continue this way because it puts us in a place where we become exhausted and both our families and the individuals we work with are not getting the versions of us that they should.

Between the three group homes I supervise, **I have a minimum of 28 open shifts per week.** This doesn't account for what the other group homes and our vocational sites also have open. If residential managers don't get shifts covered, ultimately we are responsible. The management team I work with is amazing and helps me find coverage, run appointments or errands, and even cover those shifts themselves so I can attend my children's obligations. I run one of my houses at minimum staffing needs anywhere between three to ten shifts per week. For last minute call-ins, I'm often pulling staff from other managers' houses and running their houses at minimum staffing too. Every time I think I have my schedule set for the week, something happens: quarantine, DSP out because of surgery, DSP quit, etc. I spend countless hours sending messages to find coverage and updating my schedules. My nine-year-old knows how to build a schedule for me.

Lastly, let's talk about the pandemic. All our group homes have been quarantined with staff working up to two weeks straight. Multiple staff exposures caused other staff to have to quarantine, taking multiple staff out at one location at the same time...and often midafternoon on a Friday. Families with children who were exposed at daycare and schools needing to quarantine affected our schedules. DSPs and Managers who picked up the extra coverage and then tested positive caused us to have to find coverage for the same shifts multiple times. Training at minimum takes 30 days. If you add COVID into the mix, it's sometimes triple that because DSPs are getting exposed at training and having to quarantine. We lost DSP's faster than we could train new ones, but to have new ones you need applicants - which also slowed down because many people chose to stay home during the pandemic.

If staffing shortages don't get fixed before the pandemic is over, they're only going to worsen because current DSPs will become so overwhelmed that they quit too. And while there's even been times I had to stop and ask

myself If this is really what I want to keep doing, the part of me who believes that they deserve the world won't let me quit fighting for them.”

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**“I have always wondered why the most essential jobs seem to always pay the lowest wages.** I have asked myself this question numerous times while I was a direct support professional, as a manager and now, as a coordinator. The services that my agency provides are essential. We care for those that may not be able to care for themselves, we offer support for those who have none, we provide encouragement for those that yearn to do better in order to live a more independent life. You would think, as a society, the notion of providing a sufficient wage for those that care for others would be a priority, but it's not.

**I have worked in human services a total of 17 years; never have I seen this industry struggle as much as it has lately due to the staffing crisis.** No one wants to work within human services, it's just not where the money is. It is well known that you can work as an entry level employee at a fast-food restaurant and get an hourly pay of \$15 or more, **no one wants to care for others when they can't even care for themselves on the wages that we provide.**

There was a time where people would accept lower pay just to feel like they are making a difference in the world, but that time has passed. We can no longer rely upon employees who are interested in doing honorable work for meager wages. People are expecting to get a fair wage for what they do.

My caseload has very little direct line staff. I personally work anywhere from 60 to 85 hours a week just making sure that the individuals that we support are cared for adequately due to the lack of staffing. Any hours past my 40-hour salaried work week, I earn a little over \$13 an hour. I am a college graduate. I have left this industry, made double of what I am making now and came back due to the love that I have for the people that we support. Like so many others in my line of work, I am struggling. My greatest fear is if something happens to me, to where I cannot care for these individuals, who will take care of them?

I have seen a total of 3 applications come across my desk within the last 4 months and those candidates were for applying for management positions only. I have several open positions that have been posted for over a year. **In my area alone, we are operating at 40% of the workforce that we had one year ago.** We are in dire need of direct line employees and the only solution that I can think of is if the pay that we offer increases.

I am disheartened. I am fearful for the future of some of the individuals that we support if we continue to have little to no staffing. What will happen to these people? If we do not hire and retain staff, what will become of them?

So, once again, I am compelled to ask, why does society find little value and appreciation for those that care for others? **An increase for the DSP pay is not optional, it is essential.** This industry is struggling, we need to know that society does see our worth and understands that a pay increase is necessary.”

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“I work for a facility that supports adults with disabilities in a small Nebraska town. When our facility resumed full operation after lockdown in April of 2020, our already critically short staffing situation was exacerbated by the pandemic. Unlike a McDonalds where you still get your burger and fries (business as usual) when they are short staffed, the individuals we care for are not able to live their lives to the fullest potential. We have had to cancel activities, outings, events, and beg and plead for our already overworked staff to work mandatory overtime. Not only does this degrade our individuals' quality of life, it leads to staff burnout and resignations and perpetuates a vicious cycle. In our small town of 3,787 people the applicant pool is extremely shallow. Due to our strained budget we are only able to offer new hires \$11 per hour. This is a travesty! **It is a very sad day in our great state of Nebraska when you can make \$15 dollars per hour at**

**a Walmart and \$11 per hour to take care of and support the most vulnerable in our society.** I am not composing the preceding to ask for a raise. I am begging you to grant us the resources to adequately support the individuals we take care of and give them the opportunity to live life to the utmost it can be. The current funding the administration is providing to facilities like ours is aberrant behavior and a dereliction of duty to provide the opportunity for Nebraskans to thrive and prosper. Please act now to remove this abhorrent stain on your tenure and help Nebraskans live the "Good Life".

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“As a member of an HCBS agency that provides services for the Great State of Nebraska, I will directly inform you of the need to increase rates to continue to serve participants on these waiver services. **Operating costs have exceeded what the current rate methodology reimburses providers.** The State of Nebraska is being called to thoroughly review and increase rates to serve our most vulnerable community members. Currently, we have a decrease in our workforce. Respectively, we do not have the flexibility as compared to other industries that may be prioritized before HCBS. At this time, the HCBS community is serving participants yet not able to cover their operating costs. You will see agencies moving away from serving participants in their community in a group home setting. **You will see an influx in participants needing services without providers able to serve them in the community.** This will only continue to become a larger and more public issue in regards to State performance in serving Nebraska’s developmentally disabled population. HCBS Providers are resilient; we work hard and value the lives we support. We are calling on the State to step in and make the difference. This is your opportunity to make a difference. I encourage you to take a thorough look into how your decision will directly affect the most vulnerable people. I encourage you to look at the waiting list of participants and their families currently on the waiting list for services. I encourage you to look at the length of time it takes a provider to accept an individual into services. I encourage you to look at cost reports of providers across this State. I encourage you to reach out to the participants not receiving services and look at their living conditions. I'm encouraged that everyone will make the right decision.”

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“I originally started at this company in 1982. Back then we had a sub list that was 2 or 3 pages long. As time has gone by, the cost of living has gone up but pay really hasn't. I am thankful that I have a job, but it's hard getting new people to stay. The work that we do is not easy, depending on the house that you work at. Some of the DSP's constantly have to lift the person that they are caring for, and/or their wheelchairs. There are behavioral problems in some of the houses, where staff may get injured. This job is not only physical but also is mentally tiring. It is our job to make the person that we are taking care of to feel at home, safe and loved. With pay that is only a little bit more than I was being paid in 1982. The sub list really doesn't exist anymore because of the pay. **We would like to be paid our worth - there is so much more that we do that goes unseen.** Basically, I could go to McDonalds or Target and get paid better for easier work, but I will stay. Why? Because I love my ladies...but love doesn't pay the bills.”

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“As a mother of a child with Developmental Disabilities and a Nurse Manager that provides direction and monitoring for a DD agency here in Lincoln, I could speak volumes on how the staffing crisis has affected us, but I will keep it short. The quality of mental and physician health care for the individuals supported is being compromised! **We cannot meet the State’s basic standards of care when we do not have sufficient staff.** We don't have staff if we don't pay a decent wage. It's been an exhaustive effort, one of which we are unable to win with minimal resources (funding and staffing) and the standards of care are continually rising. This is setting our program up for failure, and in turn setting the individuals with Developmental Disabilities up for failure when their life is already a battle. This is not balancing out. Appointments are cancelled or missed due to lack of staffing. Staff are utilizing their own vehicles to transport at times and this is when they are getting minimal wages and can barely afford a vehicle or gas. Staffing ratios are not being met; subsequently individuals don't receive scheduled care as they should or on time. Quality staff are not applying due to the minimal pay. Long term staff stay for the love of the job and suffer financially. Long term staff who work in excess of 200+ hours in 2 weeks end up burned out and quit. Health of the staff has deteriorated, increasing

frequency of ill calls or quitting associated with health issues. Scrounging to find staff to fill-in or simply working short staffed. Finding out we have a staff member who is homeless...sickening. The administrative team are all covering direct support shifts leaving no admin team to run the company to make sure we are keeping up to State standards!"

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**"Our current situation is not sustainable.** We are working with the most vulnerable population in the most trying time in generations with continually decreasing funding and resources. We need assistance in getting people who can and will do the job. We need a wage increase across the board in all positions. Especially the Direct Support Professional (DSP) hourly wage. Target employees are making \$15 stocking and checking out items (with a soon to be added \$2/hour holiday bonus). After an interview, we offer these DSPs \$11.75, and once they leave the door and go to the gas station they'll see signs posted for \$14/hour positions. That's absurd. I believe our DSPs do way more and give way more than those other industries and retail jobs. We are in a field to help support someone's loved one. DSPs are doing nursing positions well out of their comfort zone. They are having to provide medical care without having an actual RN license. DSPs go above and beyond for the work that they are in. They are definitely under-appreciated, underpaid and overworked!"

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"The struggle is REAL - and it isn't like we are working on a production line where you can just shut it down. We are working with people that NEED assistance with everyday things. Some people in services depend on staff for absolutely everything! If staff weren't available then some people wouldn't eat or drink, they would get skin breakdown from laying in their own feces, they wouldn't get their medications, they wouldn't move out of whatever position they are left in. We work with PEOPLE not objects, people who already have so many obstacles to overcome. What is required of staff is challenging on a "normal" day, let alone adding more challenges like COVID, staff shortages, not being able to hire people and get them started in a timely manner. Agencies, Independent Providers, Families - it doesn't matter - in this line of work SOMEONE has to show up. People are burning out being pushed to their limits; spending more time at work than with your own family. **Being afraid when the phone rings, wondering who is calling in, knowing you may not be able to cover the shifts you already have open.** In our agency all levels of employees are working direct support. The Area Director of our agency has scheduled direct support shifts along with the Support Supervisors. People can't be in two places at once. There are days we barely keep our noses above water. Potentially there could be an increase in abuse and neglect with a high burnout rate."

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"I am a Residential Program Director who oversees 24-hr group homes and semi-independent individuals with Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities. **We have been seeing more staff shortages now than we have ever in the history of our agency.** Our job is more than flipping hamburgers or sitting behind a computer screen. We are dealing with individual lives that are important to our community and the staff who work with them. We have proven high quality of life can be experienced outside of an institution. We as an agency are struggling to secure sufficient staff to work in the homes. With other companies raising their starting wages to \$15.00 an hour or more, this puts a very real hardship on us for hiring. When we are short staffed, our supervisors of the homes are having to work 60+ hours a week and other staff are putting in 50+ hours - which in turn causes burn out. What happens with our individual's when we don't have enough staff?? We can't just close down like a fast food restaurant and put a sign up "Sorry no staff available, sorry for the inconvenience." All of our group homes require two to three staff during waking hours. Our 24 hour group home individuals cannot be left alone. So that leaves the supervisors and the staff to do long hours and when assisting individuals with behavioral issues. Our DD regulations have to be followed whether we are fully staffed or not. So getting our individuals out in the community becomes harder as we don't have all the staff to be able to schedule outings. We have individual's that require one staff for them alone and so then you have to have another staff or two for the others in the home.

So I guess what I am saying is: Direct Support Professionals are very important. Our current low wages and the government paying people to stay home is not helping at all. Our DD population needs to be heard by our government and they need to be given the quality care they deserve. **We as an agency will always make sure that our individuals are taken care of, but how long can staff do 60+ hours a week?** Add staff and individuals in service getting COVID and that causes even more issues. We desperately need support from our government to raise our wages so we can hire more staff. **Our lives and the people we serve are all important.** I am asking our Unicameral and Governor to see that our essential DD services need immediate financial attention, appreciation, and support.”

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“I am the Area Director for Duet in Cass and Sarpy Counties. While I have only been at duet a short time, I have experienced a lot of challenges due to staffing shortages. I currently oversee four day sites and twelve residential sites. As far as staff goes, I have two residential coordinators, no day site coordinator, three day site managers (should have four – one for each day site), 13 DSPs for day sites (should have at least 25) and 32 DSPs for residential (should have at least 60). Clearly this is not enough staff to take proper care of the people we serve.

Now that I have given you staffing numbers for my area, let me paint a picture of the day to day struggles I have encountered as the director. Every morning I wake up to text messages and calls, usually before 6 a.m., from coordinators stating that DSPs have called in for their shifts and we now have to scramble to cover those shifts and ensure the people we serve have DSPs to care for them for the day or night. On a daily basis DSPs are working alone in the homes of people we serve. They are working alone with 2, 3, 4 plus people we serve. Worse yet, they are working alone with multiple people who have high medical needs, mental health needs, and extreme behaviors. With only one staff, it makes it difficult to provide quality care to those we serve and puts the DSP in a position to have to decide who gets priority care over others in the home. This is not acceptable.

As our residential sites suffer DSP shortage, our day sites do as well. Oftentimes when I get into the office, I am faced with having to shuffle DSPs around my four day sites just to ensure there are at least three staff at each site. One of my sites should have a minimum of 11 staff and currently there are only three staff at that location and no manager. Again, this is not acceptable, as the people we serve at this location have high medical needs and need a lot of assistance to do daily tasks. Due to the lack of staff, many of the people we serve are sitting around doing nothing, taking naps in recliners or walking around aimlessly in the room, as there are not enough staff to be able to engage and help them participate in meaningful daily activities. How fair is this that their loved ones send them to our day programs to have meaningful experiences and all they do is sit, sleep and walk around? **Would you want that kind of experience for your loved one?**

One thing I will say about all the DSPs, managers and coordinators is that they are all absolutely amazing and willing to step up and help out, no matter how stretched thin they are, as they love the people we serve and want the best for them. Every single week when I go to approve time sheets, **there is not a single person that has just 40 hours of work for a week.** Oftentimes, they are clocking in at 60 plus hours a week because we are so short staffed. I have some that consistently clock in over 125 hours every two weeks. Imagine they are working 60 plus hours a week taking care of the people we serve day and night. Imagine how little time they then have for their own families. Every single day I hear how they have missed soccer games, basketball games, dance practice, family events, and holidays with their spouses and kids. Just this Halloween, we had numerous DSPs call in due to illness and deaths in their families and managers and coordinators stepped up to cover multiple shifts. Thus, they sacrificed taking their kids to Halloween activities, as well as trick-or-treating.

This brings me to the upcoming holiday season and trying to ensure the people we serve have amazing holidays. This has become extra challenging, as many are asking for time off to spend with their own families, as they have already sacrificed multiple holidays over the last few years due to lack of staff. As a director, I now am put in a position of having to be the bad guy and tell staff they have to work because we do not have the ability to allow staff time off due to lack of staff. One of the perks to working at Duet is having floating holidays, as well as being given a holiday day for our birthday. This year almost all of the DSPs have had to have us pay out their holidays, as we do not have the ability to give time off due to lack of staff. So many of the DSPs are burnt out and need vacation time to refresh and recharge and are not able to get any time to take care of themselves. **This burnout is causing them to seek out other employment where they can get paid more money for less work.**

The DSP position is not a position that is for the weak or for someone looking to have it easy. DSPs are required to go through multiple trainings to learn how to do special cares, CPR/First Aid, med aid, CAN, etc. DSPs spend their days literally caring for people and ensuring the health and safety are taken care of properly. They constantly are ensuring the people we serve are not choking, tripping, falling, or getting hurt. They ensure their meals are cooked and often help feed them. They have to go with most of them and help them in the bathroom or even change them. There is not a day that goes by that they do not have to clean up some sort of bodily fluid. Beyond that and more importantly, they are tasked with ensuring that they do not die. I know that is blunt, but it is the seriousness of their reality. Now, tell me who wants to do all that work and have that serious responsibility and make a measly \$13.63 an hour? **Would you do all that for that little pay?**

Some of us grew up having to work for everything we had. Some of us have worked since we were teenagers, put ourselves through school and know the reality of living day to day wondering how bills are going to get paid. Many DSPs struggle with the thought of leaving because they love what they do and love helping others. However, they also struggle with the idea of staying because they are working too many hours, missing their families and still cannot pay bills or give their kids extras because they cannot afford it. Many of their children are not involved in extracurricular activities because they do not have time to take them, nor do they have the money to pay for them. At the end of the day, the love they have for the job does not overpower the love they have for their families and they find jobs in retail or fast food where they can make \$17 an hour starting pay and do not have responsibility for human life. There, they can simply go to work, stock shelves or cook food and go home with no worries at the end of the day. Makes it hard for Duet and other developmental disability agencies to hire and retain staff to care for people we serve.

**So if we cannot hire and retain staff, what will happen to the people we serve once we no longer have anyone to care for them?** Will they be shoved into an institutional facility and left to just die? All of the people we serve are people that deserve the best life possible. They are people and just because they were born with disabilities, does not make them any less of a person than you. Imagine you had a family member born with a developmental disability, how would you want them to be treated? Better yet, would you want them to go to a day program and be engaged with DSPs who care about them and do activities with them or would you want them placed in an institution where they sit and stare into space all day? I know I would not want them to be institutionalized. But I am also a caring and compassionate person who sees people for who they are and all their potential, not for their disabilities. Due to the staffing shortage, we no longer have the ability to take the people we serve out to do volunteer work or to fun activities at the park or the zoo. Again, how is this fair that they get the short end of the stick because there are not enough staff?

Just recently, I attended a career fair to seek out new employees. I had numerous candidates who were very interested in working for Duet and helping others. However, when they found out the pay was \$13.63 an hour, they respectfully declined setting up interviews, as they could get higher pay elsewhere. So let me crunch some numbers with you so that you can truly understand the need for a higher wage. A DSP makes \$13.63 an

hour and works 40 hours a week. Multiple that by 4 weeks a month and that comes out to \$2180.8 a month before taxes. Now take out about \$400 for taxes and that leaves \$1780.8 a month. Now insurance is \$940 a month for a family, which leaves them with \$840.80 a month to live on. Living expenses can include rent/mortgage, care payment, car insurance, phone payment, utilities, food, household expenses and childcare. **It is impossible.** Oh and do not forget any emergency expenses that may come up (ER visit, blown car tire, leaky roof). DSPs are then forced to take on other jobs and work more hours or quit and find higher paying jobs. Most opt to find higher paying jobs and work less hours so they can actually spend time with their families.

I could go on and on about the dire need for higher pay for DSPs, but at the end of the day, I shouldn't have to. Any one can clearly see that this is a dire situation that is negatively impacting Nebraska. If something is not done soon, agencies will have to start closing programs and people being served will end up where? What will become of them? I am disheartened that we have gotten to this point and that we have to write letters to you for you to see how horrible this situation is. How are you not already aware of the situation? Regardless of the answer, you are aware now and have the ability and power to change the situation which would positively impact thousands of Nebraska lives. I hope you make the right decision and make it quickly without any hesitation. Time is running out fast. I thank you for your time in reading all of our letters."

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"Our rate of pay does not cover inflation. I am at the point I need to find another job that pays more so I can live. We have a very tough job and work very hard daily to care for the people that need us. I have not only lost sleep thinking about how to pay bills with the cost-of-living rising sky high, but whether I will have a choice but to leave the individuals I care for because I need to pay bills that keep going up. We matter too. Please at least give us the minimum wage of \$16.00 an hour to stay competitive and to help bring in new staff so we can have a day off. Please, we are mentally drained, stressed, and tired. Why are we not getting paid what others are? **We work for the state of Nebraska and we deserve more.**"

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"I have done this work for three years. We used to have at least two staff per shift. Now we have lost much of our staff and struggle to do our best to help and take care of our people. These shortages have affected the quality of care we can provide for our people, and with managers having to step up and fill in for missing staff it creates further complications to quality of service. As a manager and single mother, this has severely impacted my ability to care for my own child as I am regularly working additional hours, doing evenings and weekends filling in for these vacancies. The unpredictable and erratic schedule resulting from our current shortages causes myself and other managers and current staff, causing some to look for employment elsewhere. A major problem is that the pay for these jobs are often beaten by fast food and cashier positions offering flexible schedules with better starting pay. As it stands now, interest in jobs at this pay is minimal and this makes it very difficult, even in the short term, to be able to do our jobs and care for our people."

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"I've been a direct support professional for 4 years and 6 months. During the orientation for this job, they explained the importance of us as caregivers filling our own cups first. For years now, us DSPs have been pouring from empty cups.

Every week I take care of two residents who each require their own individual staff, by myself, for 23 hours straight. I've worked overtime every Sunday for two years, whether I've wanted to or not. After working for 40 hours straight, I stay an extra 7 hours until another staff member can come in to relieve me of my weekend shift. I've lost valuable and irreplaceable time with my family and friends.

I haven't been able to use my vacation time to the extent that I've requested for over two years because of the staff shortage. **The hours of overtime I've worked year-to-date is 9 times the amount of vacation time**

**that I've taken this year.** I couldn't tell you the number of times I've fought with myself over the last two years, questioning if staying with this profession is something I can continue to handle.

While I'll never lose my passion for taking care of others, competing with a retail store that pays \$17 an hour and is not severely understaffed makes the choice to stay with this profession where I am underpaid and overworked extremely difficult. I believe I speak for most DSPs when I say that we are mentally, emotionally and physically drained and that our ability to continue to pour from an empty cup is running out.”

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“For the past few months I have been one of the staff working in different homes. This has made life rough for me, but I know our individuals need us. If it was not for the care of these folks, I would have quit by now. **You can't live on the money that is paid to us.** In the past it was not nearly this bad. We always had 2 staff per home and you were not being overworked as we are now. It has been rough and managers always need our help for extra hours, moving from home to home just to get by. This has been a struggle for my mental state of mind along with my family life. I hardly see my family at all because I am needed at so many homes to cover where there is no staff. My body aches as it's a lot of physical labor along with mental health drain. We need this minimum wage to go up. Inflation has hit my pocket; I am having to go further to work and having to drive more frequently. I have not been able to have any extra money after a week's worth of work. Between bills piling up, gas for the car, food, I barely get by, where **2 years ago inflation was not this bad.** I am asking for myself and everyone I work with please raise the minimum!”

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“I have been a direct support professional for 5 years now. I have supported many individuals during my time in both vocational and residential settings. I enjoy my job but over time it has gotten much harder to do my job. When I first started there were enough staff at the day site that I worked at, but the pay barely increased with 5 cents or even 10 cents once a year. The wages at other jobs began to increase and employees started to leave. Many of these people had families to provide for and it broke their hearts to leave the individuals they supported. In fact, it is not uncommon to see a former employee come back and visit with the individuals regularly. I would like to say that the staff who have replaced them over time are great, but they are not. **The turnover rates are high and the qualifications to gain employment at this company become less and less just to fill the 100+ positions that are open.**

I currently work at a home where I care for 4 individuals of different ranges of needs, alone. I and several other staff from other homes and facilities cover these shifts by ourselves because of the severe understaffing. I leave that home feeling guilty every time for having to prioritize my time and caregiving. **I am forced to choose who deserves the most care to the least care** - and this includes both physical and mental care. I try my very best, but between caregiving I also try to keep their home clean as well. I would not want my loved one to have to live in a dirty space. The home these individuals live in is easily 2500 sq ft and with multiple people living there the mess builds quickly. My coworkers and I also feel guilty because our individuals no longer get to leave their homes besides going to the day sites for 6 hours Monday- Friday. **Because we are single staffed it is impossible for us to take them out to enjoy their community and this has affected their mental health greatly.**

This also includes medical emergencies. **When an individual has a medical emergency, they must go to the hospital alone because there are not enough staff to stay with the other individuals in the home or facility.** Imagine how scary that must be for them to be alone with strangers poking at them while they are in the middle of a medical emergency. No one there to speak or advocate for them like they are used to having.

There are many other examples I could give that the severe staffing shortage has caused but the main one is the lack of care the individuals receive. It is impossible for one person to help in the restroom, administer medication, make dinner, cook, clean, run programs, and ensure that the individuals get the attention they

need. This brings me to the solution needed to fix the staffing shortage. It becomes more and more expensive to just get by every day in this country. Rent, groceries, gas, and child-care are just a few things that have become almost impossible to afford. Most people I know work more than one job just to afford the bare minimum. An increase in pay would mean the world to the employees at this company and I am sure at many other facilities that provide the same or similar care that we do. **An increase in pay would attract many applicants and hopefully attract the qualifications needed to correctly complete this job as a DSP.** I would love to be able to have help providing care to these individuals who bring so much joy to my life. I would like to be able to give them everything they need and that requires more staff that are paid a decent and livable wage.”

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“When I first started over 6 years ago, we used to fight for overtime, we had plenty of staff, and the cost of living was decent. We never had staffing issues, our individuals went out and had activity in their lives as we actually had enough staff to make every day FUN for them. This change of life for the past year to 2 years has been draining and has affected many lives. I have seen it destroy our individual's way of life and loneliness has become a huge part in our lives because we have NO Staff. We are barely getting by, we have to move workers around to meet the needs of our individuals, staff are overworked and greatly underpaid. Management has stepped up working numerous hours to keep afloat and barely hanging in there. We are exhausted. The entire DSP staff are exhausted!

Not to mention, because of the care and love for our individuals, we have greatly neglected our families, our mental health, and our happiness. Direct staff is one of the toughest jobs I have ever had in my life, even coming from the American Red Cross, which was exhausting, but nothing compared to what is in the life of being a DSP. The work is not easy, days can be draining, physically and mentally tough along with extremely LONG work hours. The biggest reason is we are understaffed. It is a very hard position working in a field with individuals with numerous health issues, behaviors, physical, and mental health issues. We do everything for them to help improve their daily lives. I know, “why say anything now after we have all stayed in this position knowing how little we get paid?” **Because it is truly passion, dedication, and LOVE that is getting us all by, barely hanging on.** Inflation and the minimum pay are hurting us to give the needed support to our individuals. We can't keep our employees and can't attract new employees for the minimum pay we offer. I ask you please consider raising the minimum wage, as we can't get new employees nor keep the employees we have. They know there are easier jobs out there that pay much more where they don't have to have such stress of working with someone with developmental disabilities. This job is one of the most important jobs out there. Without the GREAT workers we have these individuals would have NO ONE. If all staff, in which there are not many of us, decided to leave, how would this affect the lives of so many with developmental disabilities?

Please, I ask you for my family, our individuals, coworkers, friends, and myself: consider raising rates in order to raise wages for direct support professionals. By doing so, we will be able to have extra staff to go out in the community, learn, teach, grow and have fun! This is all they want is to be accepted and be out there in the community meeting new people. Currently we are extremely understaffed and cannot fulfil this need!”

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“We're all aware of staffing shortages all around the state of Nebraska. While it has affected thousands of people in Nebraska, my heart goes out to all my employees in DD services who stuck around and put in extra hours when we were short. I want to acknowledge all of the effort and hard work of our employees. When the pandemic closed everything down, we kept people safe in their homes. Providing supports to people is an essential job. The day programs closed, but the day program employees continued providing the day supports in the person's home to ensure their lives were meaningful and that they were kept safe during the pandemic. The employees took the necessary precautions by making sure they themselves were locked down between the home they worked and their own homes, so they would not expose people to Covid. When the vaccine

became available they took the vaccine, not always to protect themselves but often to ensure the people they support were protected.

Our employees have worked so hard and put in so many extra hours to make up for the staff shortage. They do it out of the goodness of their heart, and to make sure the medically vulnerable people at the location I supervise receive the best care. Without a doubt, these are some of the most passionate people I've ever met. We do everything we can to acknowledge the employee's efforts and to show their appreciation for the employees; but with the door constantly revolving with employees leaving and occasionally a new employee to replace them, it makes it difficult for the people supported and the employees.

The people we support do best in a consistent environment, with their routine in place. Our shortage makes it impossible to have consistent schedules, which in turn, affects the people we support. I hate the idea of stressing people out when it's something they can't control.

**Our turnover rate is higher than it's ever been, and our shortage is bigger than it has ever been. Employees are leaving because of the low pay and people aren't applying because of the low pay.**

People who would have never left before are leaving this field for two reasons. First, concern of being so short staffed and not able to continue working the number of OT hours necessary to provide coverage. Secondly, though they want to continue to work a job they love, there is so much guilt that there are so many other job opportunities where employers are willing to pay SO MUCH more. Maybe less job satisfaction, but more money to support their family. We don't receive the funding to appropriately compensate the DSP and managers for all they are required to do. It really doesn't seem fair to the employee that provides the quality supports to some of the most vulnerable people in our community. In order to keep providing services, something has to change. **There are people in need, and not enough people to support them.** The ratio of staff to the persons supported cannot get much worse, or we will not be able to provide the supports safely to the person.

For these reasons, we are asking for help. Please see the importance of providing additional funding to enable an increase in salaries, thus making the salary more competitive with other jobs in the community. Without the additional funding, and increases in salaries we will not be able to continue to support people with meaningful, healthy, and safe lives. Thank you."

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"I have worked in Vocational Services for the past 7 years; I love my job and I love what I do. I am very concerned about the lack of funding for services that are needed. I support a young man who has services in his hometown along with Vocational services at a Day service facility. but he is underfunded for the services he needs. His parents both have to work, he stays with his sister 3 days a week, but she and her husband also both work so he is dependent on outside services unfortunately that are not in his funding.

We are like everyone else, lacking employees. We have Vocational staff filling in at Residential settings. **Anyone who has had any training in this field, abuse and neglect are most prevalent when staff is overworked and overstressed.** I would like to see several issues addressed.

Also, as the population of DD people age, there needs to be programs in place for folks of retirement age."

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"I have only been a manager since the end of June, but I have been in the human services field since I turned 18. I have a sister with Down Syndrome, Autism, and Cerebral Palsy and when I discovered that there was an entire field dedicated to doing what I did at home and that I could turn it into a career, I was thrilled.

**It is thirteen years later and the DSPs that work under me are making just about the same amount that I did when I entered the field.** Cost of living has gone up exponentially since then, but the amount that as a non-profit we are able to pay our employees has not. We are trying to compete with fast food companies that can offer a \$15 starting wage and are considered essential. If we do not do our jobs here, people will literally die because the people we support are unable to care for themselves. **Although I don't think anyone's jobs make them better or less than anyone else, getting a hamburger is not essential, making sure that someone stays alive is.**

First, I would like to introduce you to some of the people in one of my houses and then walk you through a typical day. There are four people who are all high needs in the house. Three people in the house need assistance in the restroom, both toileting and cleaning up, and showering. One person is blind and likes a lot of attention; they also enjoy helping around the house which we encourage, but as they are blind, they're typically just making a bigger mess than actually being helpful. We encourage and tell them we appreciate it regardless, because fostering independence is a big part of our field, and it also keeps them busy which means that they're not physically attacking themselves. They are also really, really funny. They are constantly cracking jokes, singing, and asking if we need any help. They love to hang around with staff and love Barbies and books. Another individual needs stimulation always; they will follow you around the house screaming and crying for no apparent reason if not given attention constantly. They need help bathing, cleaning up after the bathroom, and they go through at least six outfits a day from urinating on themselves because they refuse to wear a brief. They also love getting out of the house, which we're not able to do because we don't have the staff. When we're able to go out they get so excited they literally scream in happiness and it's very funny. They love bubble baths, reading, and playing with their baby dolls. Another person struggles to breathe and their need to stick to their routines and rituals will often over-power their need to breathe. They need assistance in every step of the restroom, and it is extremely time consuming taking them to the restroom because they move so slowly and struggle so much. They love sitting outside, laugh when someone drops something, and will absolutely let you know if they do or do not like something. They are people that we have come to love, despite how difficult it can be to care for them.

Now that you know some about them, let me explain a typical day for them/our staff. We start the morning by getting all four of them up. Typically, all four of them have wet through their protective covers and so we assist them in the shower, strip their beds, and start the laundry. We make them breakfast, pack their lunches, give them their medications, and clean up the kitchen while keeping them entertained until transportation takes them to day services. At their day services they have maybe four staff on a good day. When I went to help on a day, they were short staffed. I counted 22 individuals on the floor with only three staff. It was a constant cycle of bathroom trips, assisting people eating, and running programs. **They spend six hours in the same room because we don't have the staff to be able to do the outings and activities that we once were able to.** This is the only point other than doctors' appointments that the individuals can leave the house because we don't have the staff at their homes to take them out either. When they get home it's bathroom trips, snack, bathroom trips, cooking dinner, passing medications, more bathroom trips, laundry, assisting with them eating dinner, assisting in getting ready for bed, trying to give one on one attention, running programs, assisting with walking, assisting them in getting ready for bed, medications again, then getting everyone off to bed. Once everyone is in bed we're trying to catch up on laundry, doing a basic clean because we don't have the time to deep clean, and then we rinse and repeat every day. The people we support aren't able to go out into the community because we can't safely take them out, they're not able to participate in the activities that they enjoy because we as caregivers are so busy taking care of their physical needs that we're unable to dedicate the time to also supporting their mental needs as well. We have to triage our attention to those that need the most help, and it is not fair to the other people living in the houses.

As caregivers we are understaffed, overworked, and underpaid. In a house where I am supposed to have five staff to be considered fully staffed, I have two. **I have a five-month-old and I missed him sitting up for the first time because I was clocked in to work for ninety-six hours straight.** My baby spends more time at his daycare than he does with me, because we have no staff. **I cannot remember the last time I was able to work a standard 40-hour week.** Every single staff I have has scheduled standing over time because we cannot fill positions. **We are missing out on dance recitals, football games, bedtime snuggles, first steps, and more because the people we support need services twenty-four hours a day, and we don't have the staff for the luxury of time off.** I have staff coming in on days off to run errands or take people to a doctor's appointment. We are drowning, and we do it because we love the people that we support. We need to be able to compete in the workforce with a living wage, and as a nonprofit we need your help in order to make it happen. Our staff need help, we need more people to help take some of the working load off all of our shoulders. The people we support deserve staff that are able to give their all, that are able to take them to do the things that they enjoy or have the time to sit down and play a card game when asked. Please consider the increase in rates and help us make all our lives better."

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"This pandemic has really affected people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in many ways, one is it has taken a toll on their mental health. We are seeing that we as staff are wrestling with not only the normal issues, but now more stress, behaviors, and anxiety that has come in waves from the masks, lock down, and quarantines that was intended to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Many of those that we support do not and cannot understand the "virus" as there is nothing tangible that we can explain and show them. We changed everything of their routine for right at a year and then went back and expect no lingering effect. While the caregivers are trying to keep everyone's life as normal as possible and safe we are doing so with very little work force. This is caused by a few things: one, we are short staffed due the labor shortage in Nebraska, staff/family members being ill, and doctors giving 14-day quarantines where staff threaten to quit if we do not follow their doctor's orders knowing we are so short and need them. We have great staff that know that this is an employee's market and they can go about anywhere to make more money. When staff can go and make \$18.00 starting wage and not be in charge of a human life and all the documentation that comes with it staff are becoming very frustrated and walking away from DSP work right now and not looking back. DSP life has been changed and it does not seem as if it will return."

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"The staffing shortage started as COVID hit our area and staff were quitting. We were so short staff in the Residentials that our Vocational staff has stepped up to help cover the Residential. Our Vocational team has been working up to 72 hour shifts and praying that all the residents might sleep a few hours so the staff might get some rest before morning hits and we go again.

Our staff have given up their family time to provide for our DD so they could continue life as normal as possible. The mental and physical stress has taken a toll on everyone trying to support the people in our care. We constantly hear about everyone being short of workers **but we cannot close.**

I did like it when Covid was starting and we were given the option to come to the ADC or the Workshop. I do think Appendix K should remain as an option for people to stay in the residence if they have a cold, are just having dental work, or a major medical issue.

I am very grateful to everyone that has stayed with us and provided for our people in care."

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"I am the store manager of Artisan Commons, a division of Duet. I am writing this to you from a different perspective. I'm not a residential manager, but I notice the strain and stress placed on them and the rest of our staff. I see them missing out on time with their families. Many have small children, forcing them to make continuous sacrifices and be constantly pulled away from them.

**The people we support and the agencies like ours are often forgotten.** We are often reminded and tell ourselves every day we are not in human services for the money. **It saddens me to say we have lost many compassionate long-term employees due to our unlivable wages. Many single parents pay more in childcare than they earn in a day's work.** This is just one example.

Losing these employees has been detrimental to our agency, and we continue to lose more and more of them. It creates a snowball effect making the jobs that we are all tasked with that much harder. I was chosen two years ago to start and manage a retail store. We opened a thrift store in an abandoned tattoo parlor next to one of our properties. We have turned an eyesore into a business generating a lot of buzz within the small business community in Bellevue and beyond. We upcycle, restore, and paint donated furniture. We have worked hard finding donations, repairing and re-inventing our furniture pieces. We have poured our hearts and souls into this store. We had to make it unique and fun to have a hook that would interest our community. This is and continues to be a lot of work. I put in this work because I see it as a beacon of hope and normalcy for our people. Someone that has never been given the chance to operate a cash register gets that chance. The chance to welcome and greet our customers and members of our community. The chance to learn how to repair something broken and make it beautiful. The chance to earn a paycheck with an hourly wage. The chance to garden in the raised beds. Really, just the chance to feel like a person.

I get the privilege to witness the excitement in people as they experience and do things for the first time that the rest of us take for granted. The thing the people I work with want the most is the chance to not be seen as different. This store gives them that chance. It gives our Agency the chance to teach our community they are not different, they are capable of doing these things with our staff's help and guidance and compassion.

We have several families with children with disabilities that frequent our store and are interested in our services. They bring them to our store because they know it is a judgment free zone. The community of Bellevue has been very supportive and interested in our mission. This is exciting for us to finally have our own place of true community inclusion. We have worked so hard for this!

My fear that keeps me up at night is that this will end soon. Because of staffing shortages, we have already had no choice but to reduce our hours at Artisan Commons so my staff and I can help cover some of the other sites that are severely short-staffed. This creates fear and uncertainty for the people we support too because their routines become disrupted. **We all live in fear and uncertainty of what our future holds.** Management meetings are stressful and all I can think is that our beloved agency is crumbling. Where the store I manage is currently doing well, other parts are struggling and we are all one agency that relies on the sum or our parts.

I have a deep, rich history here. My mother worked here for many many years, so I grew up with the people we support. They are my family. People like me and our staff are their entire social circle. I'm sad to be seeing things I never thought would happen. We are not able at this time to provide the level of care that people deserve. **We are being put in the position (because of understaffing) of basically just keeping people alive and not being able to give the care and compassion they deserve.**

**We live in fear and sadness for the people we support.** What happens to them? Where do they go if we can't continue? Please let's not make these fears a reality. We strive for the best for all people within our agency, people supported and the people who support them. I take pride in what I do every day. I love where I work. I know many of my coworkers feel the same way. But these sacrifices cannot continue. We all know family is important to everyone. My coworkers should not have to constantly give up time with theirs.

We recently lost yet another reliable, dependable, compassionate employee to a fast-food restaurant that pays a higher wage than our agency. Our mission serves a purpose, but we cannot continue it if our employees are not paid a liveable wage. **One way or another these people are supported by state funding, whether in a quality, compassionate environment such as our agency or in an overcrowded state run facility with nowhere else to go.**

We are simply asking for you to look into helping us continue to give the opportunities to people that would not otherwise have them. They are people worthy of the same rights and privileges as everyone else.

Thank you for your time and consideration.”

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“Being a DSP has been really hard during this pandemic. We cannot use our PTO right now as we do not have co-workers to cover. We do everything in our power to make sure that those we support are safe and use the precautions to keep them safe from covid. We have worked in the houses for 2 weeks straight (no time off) to ensure that the people are safe in their homes. This has kept us away from our families. **As a DSP we do not make the money needed to cover the bills and many of us have to have more than one job.** This work is our priority, but it is getting harder and harder to do because being so short staffed. We give of ourselves all we can.”

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“I have worked in this field for over 21 years. It has become more difficult each year to hire good quality staff. In the past I would be able to hire staff right from high school. At that point, I could get the training done and have them job shadow with the more experienced staff so that they could learn the proper ways to work with our individuals. They would work all summer, thus giving my regular staff time to take some personal time to recharge. When the young staff would go to college, I would have them available for weekends, holidays etc. It worked out great. Often they would stay on due to the wage increase after the year. Now, we cannot hire staff until they are 19. This eliminates catching the possible staff early. They go to the nursing homes where they can begin younger. This is a big problem.

Lately, there are no possible candidates looking for jobs. It seems that no one wants to work and then we run into the problem of burn out. With fewer staff we are not able to be as person-centered as we wish. We do a great job but often my Director and myself are on the floor to help out, picking up and dropping off individuals and working the houses. With fewer staff available, that limits us in growth. We need something to bring in young staff and allow them to grow with the company and become outstanding Direct Support Staff.”

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“Where do I start with the Pandemic? For me the struggles keep on. I have worked to the point I have questioned whether this is the work I want to continue on doing. I am a residential manager and I have been working all shifts to help cover. We tried to not have staff transfer to other residences to limit possible exposure, but there is not a line of staff waiting in the wings to fill in. That fill in is me and our administrative staff. Staff are tired. **Many of our staff were completely dedicated to the individuals during this time, but you don't see them being counted as frontline heroes by our state.** We need to be able to reward those who are. I was tired. I am tired, but I remain committed to our purpose and our individuals. We pulled together to keep the individuals safe in a time we were scared also.

The impacts of COVID continue. What was once difficult in finding staff is now even more difficult to recruit and hire. We have an awesome job, but this state does not compensate us accordingly for what we do.”

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“I am a Day Center Director. I have worked in this field for more than 17 years; this year has been the most challenging due to the staff shortage. The staff shortage affects several things in our participants' lives, as they depend on us for so many things. The staff assist with the cares, with meal prep, hygiene needs,

medications, medical appointments, behavioral issues, transportation, and more on a day-to-day basis. The role as a DSP is like a CNA and sometimes more strenuous when dealing with behavioral issues. Our staff are depended upon daily. It is imperative that Direct Support Professionals are considered essential workers; they should also be compensated for their work.

Challenges we have faced this past year include staff quitting because they have to come to work on holidays, snow days, and throughout the pandemic - however, they are not compensated the way they should be. We have interviewed many people and hired them, but they have not shown up for training. We have had people turn down the job because of the pay. We had staff quit because they do not feel like they are paid to deal with the behavioral issues they may face. Sometimes the participants are physically aggressive, they may be self-harm, and staff must assist with the de-escalation process. Dealing with behavioral situations can take hours and more than one staff.

When staff are out due to COVID concerns it causes another huge strain to our staffing. When this occurs, we are unable to participate in community events, our individuals must wait while staff deal with multiple other people, and staff burnout. Staff are forced into working overtime and this also causes them to quit.

As an advocate to the individuals we support it is necessary to increase the pay for the Direct Support Professional.”

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“Over the eight years I have worked in this field, I have created strong connections with the people we support. I have a love for the work I do; it brings my heart joy and I can say the same for my coworkers. The problem is that **caregivers have been taken for granted for too long**. We are essential workers who are there night and day, sacrificing our holidays, family time, sanity, and important events for the people we support. We deserve to make a living wage. The people we support deserve reliable staff who don't have to work 2-3 other jobs to make ends meet. I believe the work we do is important for the community. If caregivers are given a wage they can live on and feel appreciated to do this work, then we wouldn't have such high staff turnover, resulting in happier staff who are more willing to give their all. Make the vicious cycle end! WE DESERVE A LIVING WAGE.”

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“We all know that COVID has changed the way we work. With many people not returning to the workforce or working from home, today's labor shortage in the intellectual and developmental disability world affects the individuals we support in ways that can be harmful to them.

In my role as a Quality Coordinator, I investigate all allegations of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. **In the year of 2021, I have completed 98 investigations, and more than half of them happened due to exhaustion or not having the right people in the right position.** This is because we have been forced to use the little staff available and schedule based on having a person to work, not because we have the right person to work with a specific individual.

**We know residential managers truly understand the risks and stress of staff shortages. We need our state representatives to understand it as well.** Our managers are struggling to cover shifts due to the labor shortage, on top of the daily call-ins due to COVID, the flu, or simple exhaustion and needing to force time off to recharge.

Our services are essential services. We are front line workers that ensure the health and safety of our most vulnerable. Unlike non-essential industries who can adjust their wages, pricing, or hours to mitigate staff shortages, DD providers cannot. We cannot close our doors. We cannot offer competitive wages without a change in the rates set by the State.

We know it will not solve all our problems, but it will help alleviate some of the stress facing our industry.  
**Please help us help our most vulnerable.”**

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“I have worked at this agency for 9 years and never have I seen such a shortage in staff and lack of sufficient care. Through the years, I have progressed from a Direct Support Professional to Residential Manager and now a Coordinator. I have first-hand knowledge of how the pandemic has affected our ability to retain and provide better wages for our staff.

Before, a home would have 3-4 DSP's working together to support activities of daily living, go out into the community, and provide quality care. I remember being able to go to the movies, take the people to dances, and go out to eat. I loved being able to bring joy to their lives and putting a smile on their face. Today, we are hopeful to provide only 1 DSP to a home where 3-6 people need support. I can no longer give them the one-on-one attention they need and deserve. A clean home is no longer a priority because the high levels of care and safety supersedes the need to complete tasks such as chores. How is it ethical to tell the people we support that they must stay home because we have no staff? How is it okay for them to not have a clean home because there was not enough time for 1 DSP to complete all tasks by themselves during their shift?

As a Coordinator, I must work as a DSP because of the staffing shortages we are experiencing. Currently, I am working over 60-70 hours per week as a salary employee. This does not include being on call 24/7 during our down time. I have missed so many family functions that my husband and children are starting to feel the effects of my job. It is utterly defeating to have a weeks' worth of vacation planned and paid for, only to find out that my vacation time was denied and my family left without me. It was memories lost, experiences missed, and the loss of finances due to unnegotiable fees. I am missing out on the little things as well. I am unable to drop off or pick up my own children from school. I missed trick or treating, parent teacher conferences, family dinners, bedtime stories, and much more. I have made many sacrifices in order to keep our agency afloat, but at what cost?

The current DSPs are overworked, stressed, and underpaid. They are working 50- 60 hours per week with the majority working by themselves. How can we compete as a non-profit agency of essential employees who save people's lives at our wages versus a for-profit organization such as McDonalds who are paying \$15 per hour? How do we explain to an applicant that their starting wage is lower than retail, when the job is to maintain care and supports of someone else's life, when Costco's starting wage is \$17 per hour stocking shelves and checking out merchandise? **Every day I come into work, I must stare at the signs across the street from our workplace saying, “starting pay is \$15.” How does that impact our DSP's who also have to drive past that sign every single day to work?** It's disheartening. It's infuriating. It's downright incomprehensible.

All in all, we are not providing a quality life for the people we support - nor are we providing it for our current DSPs or our leadership team. The impact on our lives is significant and we need change now. An essential employee deserves to feel appreciated for their hard work and dedication, especially during the pandemic labor market issues we are experiencing today. I beg of you to hear our pleas and help us increase the wages that DSPs deserve.”

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“DSPs and managers have always worked hard to support people with developmental disabilities in their homes, workplaces and communities. They are part of the essential workforce, and since COVID they have become even more valuable, providing care and supports to a VERY vulnerable population. Currently they are experiencing additional and unique stressors because of changing roles, and work conditions. **If we fail to support the DSPs and managers, we put people with developmental disabilities at risk.**

DSPs and managers are the heart and soul of supports for people with disabilities and someone must listen and take action now! We need competitive wages. **The funding that a provider receives does not allow the provider to pay wages that reflect the skill, responsibility and training required for the job.** Current funding does not allow the provider to offer a competitive wage that competes with the wages of other jobs in the community.

A 50-year-old woman (who has been employed as a DSP for more than a decade) ensures quality person-centered supports so that the people she supports have meaningful lives. Many of the people she cares for require medical supports that her CNA background along with the training she received from the nurses at the agency have trained her to provide. She ensures that the people she supports are healthy, safe and happy. **Her son, a 16-year-old attending high school, just started his first job. He is working as a Movie Theater Attendant making \$15 an hour. His mother's current salary is \$14.85 an hour.** This is someone that will leave a gaping hole in the lives of the people she supports and in her life if she leaves. However, she has a family to support. The guilt she feels staying in a job where she makes an annual salary of \$30,000 per year doing what she loves is painful when she has been offered a job working as a Dental Office Receptionist, with no experience, making \$11,000 more annually (both jobs offer a comparable benefit package).

Longtime employees have left the agency because of the low pay and the ability to receive more pay doing jobs that require less skill, responsibility and training. THE BIGGEST REASON they left was not that they had to work during Covid, it wasn't because they were working short staffed every shift, or that they were working so many hours that they hardly were seeing their own children. They left because they were unable to receive a fair wage to support their families. Today we are receiving very few applications. The applications we receive, often are people that are not qualified to provide supports to the people receiving services from our agency. For people of all abilities, success is often determined by highly influential, skilled persons who help them navigate both the work world and home life. Without the employees needed to provide the supports and services that enable people with developmental disabilities to be integrated into the community, provider agencies have little hope of maintaining and expanding on the progress they've seen in the last decade. There is no way to provide community inclusion, support and empower individuals with developmental disabilities without the ability to hire the persons with the skills to provide those supports."

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"I am writing this letter to account my experience working as a DSP in the pandemic labor market. Ever since COVID-19 broke out there have been many people that have left this industry, causing me and my co-workers to have to sustain the care of our individuals amongst our very small team. I work in a home that requires 24/7-hour care and my team consists of me and 2 other people. The impact of this staffing shortage has been mentally draining to say the least. I usually work during the weekdays by myself, and it has caused me burnout/job fatigue, as I lack additional help.

My individuals have not been able to get their normal care; I have struggled to get my individuals to doctor appointments during the week being single staffed, as my individuals are considered higher medical this is very hard to do alone. It is hard to go out and do community activities, as I do not have anyone to assist me. This is the same circumstance with grocery shopping. I feel undervalued for the work I do, when I know there are businesses like McDonalds that have increased their minimum wage.

While people were afforded the luxury to stay home during the COVID-19 breakout, me and my co-workers have continued to work every day and show up for the individuals we support. In some cases, it is even hard to find coverage in emergency situations due to being short staffed. The only thing I can say as a health care worker is that if we are essential, we should be afforded a wage that illustrates this."

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“I’ve worked in the DD field for over 11 years and can honestly say the effects of the pandemic on community-based services are beyond anything I could have imagined. The people we support have faced difficult changes, not being able to attend normal activities, new routines, 14-day quarantines, and illness. Some of the people we support adjusted well to these changes, and for others it was devastating. There’s a gentleman on my caseload who’s personality is unrecognizable from before the pandemic. He has limited communication skills, but despite being non-verbal he did everything he could to let us know he was struggling with change. We saw new and aggressive behaviors, as we lacked the ability to explain to him why he wasn’t going to his day services, why after being exposed to an employee who tested positive he had to stay home for two weeks. He’s inflicted significant injuries to himself over the last year, and due to his aggression towards others, staff have risked their own safety to transport him to seek medical care as they’re attacked while driving. The DSPs who support this gentleman are some of the hardest working, most dedicated staff I have had the pleasure of working with and they’ve stuck with us and this gentleman while we worked out a plan to improve safety for transportation.

I’ve had employees work 24 straight days, 24 hours a day when a person being supported tested positive and the quarantine got pushed out as his housemate tested positive towards the end of the original quarantine. This gentleman eventually needed to be hospitalized due to being so weak. One of our DSPs had to carry this normally self-ambulatory gentleman back and forth from the restroom while we waited for the hospital to have a bed for him.

Before the vaccination was available, we asked our staff to cancel plans/vacations, miss weddings, and in some cases asked employees to choose between their employment with us, and other employment in a high-risk field. As people got sick, our staff showed up, working lots of overtime, saying goodbye to their family for 2 weeks and camping out at a group home for a quarantine.

We all assumed staffing would get better. That people would get vaccinated and come back to the job market, but that doesn’t appear to have been the case. Other fields and industries have been able to adjust to the scarcity of the labor market. Making modest price increases to be able to offer higher wages. We can’t do that. Our rates are fixed based on tiers and waivers. We’ve managed to raise DSP wages over the last year, but the modest increase in starting wage is not able to keep up with the rest of the market. When I look at job posting boards, I’m seeing entry level positions starting at \$15-\$17, which we can’t compete with. Often these positions are better hours, don’t require the kinds of certifications/training our field does, and are positions where it’s easier to maintain a work and personal life balance.

In a previous role in the DD field, I was an abuse and neglect prevention trainer. I know that our staffing crisis is putting the people we support at risk. Those hard-working dedicated staff are more likely to fall asleep and have a lapse in supervision with the additional overtime they’re working, more likely to have medication errors, more likely to lose their temper and say and do something that they can’t take back. Right now, we’re holding things together with lots of overtime, tired managers, and a lot of creative problem solving, but it’s not sustainable. I’ve seen story after story in the news about businesses closing due to the hardships of the pandemic and difficulty hiring employees. We don’t have the option to close shop; we can’t close early because of a staffing shortage. We desperately need waiver rates that will allow us to offer DSP wages that will make us competitive in the labor market so the people we support can receive the proper care and support to stay safe, healthy, and live fulfilling lives.”

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“The COVID Pandemic has been life changing in many ways, it has diminished our workforce greatly by people leaving the workforce in record numbers. Hiring has been a challenge because of that diminished workforce which in turn makes it harder to fulfill my duties for the agency. Time that could be spent in other

ways is used filling open shifts from staff shortages, often with staff who are new to the environment here residentially. Staff who are not incredibly familiar with the environment come with lots of questions; this in turn creates hardship in my work/life balance as when away from work, this takes time away from my children. The staff generally ask simple questions, but they are frequent, and interrupt my personal time. In addition to fill-in staff having questions, my work/life balance further becomes encroached upon when staff are potentially exposed to COVID-19. The process of tracing contact within our company, along with ensuring the CDC recommendations are followed to keep everyone safe as possible; requires lots of phone calls back and forth between multiple parties and becomes entirely time consuming. Exposure to individuals in service creates documentation in addition to the phone calls. Often these phone calls happen when I am off working hours, yet I must respond (leaving my family) to address the issue. COVID-19 has further affected me by creating more duties. For example, grocery shopping is an essential duty in the residential homes and now it is generally the manager taking care of that duty since we are trying to limit exposure possibilities for people we support. This task was not previously completed by the manager; COVID has changed that, as well as the amount of cleaning and sanitizing. All touchable surfaces are now being sanitized hourly regardless of being touched or not.”

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“We have worked for the agency for over 20 years and during this time we have not experienced the staff shortage as much as it has this past year.

We are proud of our entire team and all of our staff for their outstanding commitment and dedication to the people we serve, although we are living on a daily prayer that those that have stayed committed to their jobs this far are beyond the point of "burn out", this includes the residential managers. Committed staff and managers keep our people healthy, happy and protected, although it is getting to the point that they are losing the desire to pick up another shift, or work the undesired schedule because of the staff shortage. Often the managers need to pick up the slack and have been feeling that they too are missing out on family events due to the staff shortages. Some are working an abundance of overtime, in some instances **staff are working the equivalent of 2 full time jobs**. This is forcing overtime which is not included within the agency budget. This puts such a mental strain on staff and managers resulting in call-ins. This overworked environment causes so much anxiety and stress that people often resign. We lose out to the higher wage an hour jobs, this causing more shortage and frustration.

Lack of staff is also putting a strain on the people we support. Inconsistency with staffing causes much anxiety and frustration resulting in behavioral problems. This then causes a shortage in these homes because staff and managers feeling overworked are too stressed to pick up hours at these places. The responsibility of this job is so much more than that of a fast food worker, cashier, etc. that the staff feel underappreciated with the pay. The managers have been using their own money to help with staff morale, although at the end of the day it ends up being not enough when bills need to be paid.

Additional comments from our managers...

- I'm frustrated with being down 2 staff and unable to find subs or staff that are willing to work hours, so then it's left up to me to work all those hours and miss out on family time and cancel planned vacations. I've been maxed since June.
- Daily expectations are overwhelming...not only excessive documentation that needs to be done, the cares that are needed, meds, bathing, cleaning/cooking, shopping, personal cares, social activities, assessments, skill plans, behavioral assessments etc."...and to receive an unworthy wage.
- Being so short staffed and all the OT that is asked, the staff are run down. They cannot work to the best of their ability. Mistakes are made and managers are doubling their work by corrections and having to provide extra monitoring, and/or as a manager having to cover.

- My frustration is the fact that being down so many staff, I have been working direct support at the homes myself, and I cannot work as efficiently at my job: meeting deadlines, completing quality control, working on schedules...this is taking much more time away from my own family.
- We are working so many direct line hours our daily manager duties become an overwhelming to do list. Coming to work is so anxiety-filled that you can't even settle down to do your work or sleep at night.
- With so much stress it causes strain on family and coworker relationships, when we can't meet our deadlines it escalates up the chain of command.
- We could go on and on with examples, but there is not enough time.
- It is difficult to grab prospective employees' attention when the wage is so low.
- We feel a high wage would help with employee retention and new hires.
- WE ARE STRESSED!...PLEASE HELP!"