



Dear Editor:

I am a direct support professional (DSP) who works with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Despite the significant and historic lack of funding in this field, going to work makes me “feel.” I can feel the reasons I go to work. I can put on a real smile. The people I work with are inspiring. I am inspired to do better for the greater good of another’s life. I love my job for one reason that could be described a million different ways: the people.

Being a DSP is unbelievably rewarding. My job is honest and respected. My coworkers and I are not just DSPs, but counselors, teachers, nurses, coaches, advocates and friends to the people we serve. We get to end our days knowing we helped someone, whether by teaching a new job skill, giving a medication, doing first aid or just lending an ear. I absolutely love my job because it is not a job, but a way of life.

The American Network of Community Options and Resources stated, “The DSP workforce shortage is a national public health crisis.” In Minnesota alone, more than 8,700 direct support professional jobs are unfilled due to low wages, which do not match the responsibilities of the work. Often, DSPs can earn higher pay at fast food chains than for providing care to one of our most vulnerable populations. Nationally, there is a 45 percent DSP turnover rate.

Due to low wages paid in the industry, my family and I have made huge sacrifices because of a lack of financial stability... missing appointments, not being home with a sick child (or staying home and missing out on pay), deciding to either buy groceries or pay a bill. It's not even living paycheck to paycheck, but living paycheck to the next day. Despite the numerous sacrifices we all make, in the end it's all okay when you know you are making a difference in someone else's life. Whether we as DSPs get raises or not, we will continue to come to work because the individuals we support need us.

There is so much I would love for lawmakers to know, and too much to write. I wish lawmakers could meet all of the people we serve; they would fall in love with each and every one of them. I would like to thank State Senator Gary Dahms for serving as the chief author of the Best Life Alliance bill to increase wages for direct support professionals by 4 percent in 2017 and 4 percent in 2018. I ask all lawmakers to please prioritize services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities by utilizing a portion of Minnesota's projected (2018-2019 fiscal year) \$1.65 billion surplus.

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