

Good afternoon Labor and Public Employees Committee. I am Claude Holcomb. I reside in Hartford Connecticut. I have a significant disability and have lived in the community for many years with self-directed supports. I am here today to bring up some points concerning the proposed legislation to unionize attendants, which you may not have considered.

I know some legislators may not see any reasons why attendants should not be unionized. Right now it may even seem like this is a good choice for the state. I am here to tell you why unioning attendants would be a very bad choice!

Prior to living in the community, I lived in several institutions in this state, one of which was unionized. These experiences have given me a first-hand understanding of some of the problems associated with unionized attendant care, and the benefits that come with being able to hire, train and direct my own supports.

I am not saying that attendants don't need good pay and benefits, of course they do. But if this proposed legislation is passed, there will no longer be a level playing field between the individual employer and the attendant. Unionization of attendants will also establish fixed rates of attendant pay and this will result in the net shrinkage of available hours for the people who need them.

Unionization almost always results in individual workers receiving more hourly pay, which is a good thing. However, people with disabilities who require these services won't receive increased allotments of funding to pay for these pay increases. Our current Connecticut Medicaid Waiver funding programs have caps. If attendant wages increase, and the total funding pie stays the same, then a person's hours of care will need to be reduced to cover these pay increases.

Home care services are based on one-to-one relationships. Unionizing attendants would make it more difficult for a person with a disability to train his or her attendants on their own specific needs. It would also make it more difficult to fire someone for abuse or neglect. Abuse or neglect perpetrated by an attendant against a person with a disability in their own home would most likely happen without the presence of witnesses. It would be one person's word against another's, and the union would most likely be obligated to advocate for the attendants. If a person with a disability wants to terminate someone from employment now, they need a good reason to do so. But if attendants are unionized, a person with a disability would have to defend his or her decision unaided before the employee and their union steward and their care would cease while the case was being resolved.

Another concern is how the state would handle an attendant walkout, slow down or the "blue flu." If a person's care were to stop for a strike or to resolve a grievance, there would be no one to come in to help you as there is for people supported by an administrative structure, such as a nursing home or a group home. Is the National guard going to respond under these circumstances?

Under existing Medicaid laws, nursing home care is guaranteed to all Americans who qualify, and home care is only an option. We, the recipients of home care services, are trying to get the federal law changed to afford greater opportunities for community-based care and support. Unionizing home care attendants will endanger this trend, which we see as so positive, to a more institutionalized model of care. I am concerned about the intention of this proposed legislation because it is allowing the unions to take control over peoples lives who are saving the state large sums of money from the need to be institutionalized.

Allowing attendants to unionize puts us back into a medical model of support in Connecticut, where we no longer have the control or ability to make our own choices. It also puts us at risk of institutionalization as the affordable system now in place will be replaced with a more institutionalized model, to the detriment of people with disabilities and the state's taxpayers. More importantly, people with disabilities will lose our independence and dignity to guide our own lives as citizens of Connecticut.

These are some of the concerns I have about unionizing attendants. Others in the disability community in Connecticut also share these concerns. I hope this legislative body will think about why you are in office is it to protect the rights of the people of Connecticut, or the rights of the union?