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Testimony in favor of bill # 5433

My youngest brother, Rene, is 42 years old and has Down syndrome. He has limited speech ability and even though he is bi-lingual, he can't write or form complex sentences. He also has limited eyesight and other physical disabilities.

Until 5 years ago, my parents cared for Rene in their home. However, that all changed when my father passed away and we quickly realized my mother was too old to provide the care Rene needed.

It was really important to me and our family that Rene be able to stay at home. Because of his limited speech, people who aren't used to it have a very hard time understanding him. We also wanted him to be able to stay with his mother and keep his job at a local feed and seed company.

At that time, I was working as a supervisor at a lumber mill. I made good wages and had benefits. But I made the decision to do whatever it would take to keep my brother out of an institution and my mother out of a nursing home. So I quit my job and became my brother's caregiver.

If home caregivers in Washington hadn't been in a union, I don't think I would have been able to afford to make this move and care for my family.

Before the union, caregivers were getting paid \$7.65 per hour with NO benefits.

After our union was formed in 2002, we were able to secure a fair wage, get affordable health insurance and receive on-the-job training that enables me to take better care of my brother. Thru collective bargaining, we have been able to make small changes to better our caregivers' lives.

- 1) We've been able to get workers' compensation (L & I)

2) We have a higher wage scale - it starts at \$10.03 an hour and after 2,000 hours you get a raise.

3) Affordable quality health care with vision, dental and preventative care coverage.

4) We're reimbursed for much of the mileage we put on our cars traveling to get to our consumers' homes.

5) We receive training and also have FBI criminal background checks.

6) We receive vacation pay; for every 40 hours you work, you get 1 hour of paid vacation.

More important than all of those benefits though is that the union gives me the chance to give my brother a voice.

On my own, I'm a very shy person. I don't generally seek out opportunities to get up and speak in front of a lot of people--but the union encouraged me to get involved in speaking up not just for my brother, but for all the people PCAs in Washington care for.

I feel like I was called to do this in the same way I was called to take care of my brother. **My brother can't tell legislators why these programs are important and what they mean to us, but I can.** The union has given me the ability and the strength to do that.

We still have work to do so that caregivers can have a living wage and a retirement plan.

But I now have the support I need to help me provide the best care I possibly can for the person who means the world to me. Thanks to our union, I have the support I need to help me stand up for him and all the other people who depend on home care programs.