



Testimony of Linda Vannoni

Vice President, New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199, SEIU

Before the Public Health Committee, March 19th, 2014

In re: DDS House Bill 5534 - AN ACT CONCERNING THE PROVISION OF SERVICES TO INDIVIDUALS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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Good afternoon Senator Gerratana, Representative Johnson and members of the Public Health Committee. My name is Linda Vannoni, Vice-President of District 1199, and I testify today on behalf of our union's 3,600 members who work for private providers delivering services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in our state. I am here to testify in support of House Bill 5534.

Connecticut does not have a comprehensive plan for meeting the urgent needs of the over 3,500 people on the DDS waiting list, much less all people in need of, but not yet eligible for, DDS services. The Department has tried to innovate with new models in supported employment, day programming and residential care. But efforts to balance the budget have over-ridden its higher purpose. State funding decisions have created a de-facto policy which limits choices and independence for people with disabilities and eroded the wages and benefits of care givers. Formerly middle class career jobs are now low wage, high turnover "Mc-Jobs". Bill 5534 establishes a framework for a policy truer to the Department's mission rather than one predicated on a race to the bottom.

DDS now uses a rate setting system that mandates cuts to private providers who pay for wages & benefits above the low rates set by the Rate Study Committee. In response, these private providers took drastic action to balance budgets. Providers once willing to invest in the training and support of quality

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jobs have cut full-time employees to part time. In the last four years, across the private sector, caregivers have seen their wages decline through hours' cuts and the loss of affordable medical benefits – in many cases representing a greater than 20% reduction in incomes. 90 % of this workforce have seen no raise in six plus years. One employer alone cut over 200 workers' weekly hours of service through cuts to direct care worker's schedules – and he was not alone in this. These cuts restrict choice, community integration and quality care giving. Few of our 3,600 members in this field retain a 40 hour work week, so they must piece together two and three jobs per week to make ends meet. This leads to an ever-changing cast of exhausted faces in the lives of the people workers care for. The ultimate cost is failing to live up to the Federal mandate that the State must ensure people with disabilities receive the most independent and integrated care possible as full participants in our communities.

Many of the 1,500 families on the waiting list considered “emergency” or “Priority One” could benefit from placements in current vacancies at private provider agencies. Yet the message they receive from DDS is State funding doesn't support this, only people whose living guardians have passed away get placements. Employers who recently bid on and accepted CRS model residential contracts have had to turn contracts back to the State since they couldn't adequately and safely operate due to insufficient funding. Other Employers with low turnover due to historically fairer wages and benefits have told us they can't

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bid on these less restrictive models because reimbursements are insufficient for their reasonable costs of doing business.

As a Union we support a real systems change that offers people with intellectual disabilities and their families a wide array of alternatives for how to get the care and supports they need. Whether residential, in-home, day programming, vocational, educational, our members are able and willing to provide these services. We want to be part of the solution.

This is HB 5534. It calls for all stakeholders to sit at the table to forge a plan for a broad spectrum of services for people with disabilities at all stages of their lives and needs. It calls for a time table for creating this plan and its implementation. It calls for implementing such a plan without undermining currently provided services and the wage and benefits of the care givers providing those services. Let's get to work building a system that lives up to the promise.

Thank you for your attention to these urgent issues and I will be happy to answer your questions.