

To Whom It May Concern:

Passionately, I have come to work every day with a determined focus on improving the lives of our community and, in particular, the individuals we support. Along this journey, I have realized that we also need to focus on the lives of the people providing this essential support. Most of the time, we think of Direct Support Professionals, but as I uncover each day, the list of employees touching the lives of the staff is larger than the daily contact of the Direct Support Professional. We can debate what staff level is essential to our operations, and I will stand up and say all of them. But we cannot debate that at the end of this support is people. It is someone's daughter or son, brother or sister, aunt or uncle. As well as delivering this support is someone, such as a father and mother, daughter or son, brother or sister, or aunt or uncle. Many work long hours and still not making enough to make ends meet.

Recently, many of us eagerly anticipate the joy of preparing holiday meals, envisioning a feast of turkey, mashed potatoes, apple, and pumpkin pie. It's a time for warmth and togetherness with family and friends.

However, amid the festive spirit, it's crucial to recognize that many people in our community are facing uncertainty and anxiety about providing a holiday dinner for their families. Many people tirelessly work one, two, or even three jobs just to secure the basics: food, shelter, and clothing. Imagine working 16-hour days and still being unable to purchase a turkey for your family. Imagine working overtime every week to afford the necessities and taking on even more shifts during the holidays to make room in your budget for modest gifts.

Direct Support Professionals are facing that reality. This dedicated workforce supports people with intellectual and developmental disabilities at state-funded agencies in every county of New York. These professionals play a pivotal role in our communities, helping individuals with disabilities live their best lives. Their responsibilities encompass a wide range of skills in a variety of settings, from handling medical and behavioral needs to providing personal care and transportation, developing life skills, and fostering community connections. These are essential jobs which require a high level of skill and responsibility. Yet, according to a recent survey of New York state DSPs conducted by Miami University of Ohio, 48% of the Direct Support Professionals report food insecurity.

These are people who go to work every day and often work multiple overtime shifts per week. They may spend their day preparing meals or operating feeding tubes to ensure others are cared for, but their pay for that work doesn't provide enough to guarantee a healthy dinner on their own table. We, as a society, cannot accept this inequity any longer. We need to stand up and make noise. We need to make a change.

As we approach the budget vote I appeal to the Governor and State Representatives to consider the invaluable contribution of these workers. I implore you to include a 3.2% Cost of Living Adjustment and the Direct Care Wage Enhancement in the 2024-25 State Budget. This reasonable and needed investment is not just about wages. It's about affording these workers the dignity they deserve. By adequately recognizing and compensating their efforts, we can ensure they continue to provide crucial care and services on behalf of the State to her citizens in need of support. The impact of this investment will extend beyond the direct care workforce to

the people they support and their families, who face an immense amount of stress ensuring that support. Let these staff feel the dignity of working for a living wage.

Another point is that I am not begrudging the OPWDD State Operated Program staff. However, they start out upstate, making \$24.74 per hour, while the Voluntary Program staff start at \$16.87 per hour. That is a difference of \$7.87 per hour, or \$629.6 per pay, \$1,259 per month, or \$16,369 per year. Not when someone is making \$35,090 per year that additional \$16,000 is huge and almost doubles their wage. Think about being able to help us meet this goal of paying a better salary. We would be able to stabilize the support needs of the people we support and stabilize the economic uncertainty for the staff providing this support. There should not be two societies of work, and someone should not have to choose between providing support and meeting a living.

So please let's extend our compassion beyond our immediate circles in the spirit of the holidays. Investing in this year's budget can make a difference in the lives of those who work tirelessly to uplift our community. Let's stand together to demand dignity and fair compensation to uplift our unsung heroes.

Donald J. Mullin, CEO of The Arc of Rensselaer County  
3 Carolina Avenue, Troy, NY 12180