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Senate Appropriations Budget Testimony for 4.5.2016

Hello. I am Max Barrows. I am person with Autism and I live with my family in Worcester, Vermont. I work for Green Mountain Self-Advocates as Outreach Director and I receive developmental services to keep me organized on my job.

Many Senators have and will continue to hear from our 600 members and their families about the need for a Cost of Living Adjustment for the designated and specialized service agencies. They provide essential services for the health and wellbeing and safety of people with developmental disabilities. They are under financial pressure because there has NOT been a Cost of Living increase since 2008. In addition to level funding, there have been budget cuts which have taken an enormous toll on our support system which for many of us is our only lifeline.

The good news is that we have a service system that employs amazing Vermonters who love their jobs providing community supports to people with disabilities. They are the backbone of the system and everyday heroes going out of their way to make a difference in people's lives. But support workers do not make a livable wage! Sometimes they have no choice but to take another job for better pay. Over the past 3 years, there was a 27% turnover rate for support staff working with people with developmental disabilities. A livable wage will go a long way toward reducing staff turnover.

It is not easy for people with disabilities to constantly have to adapt to staff changes. Often we go without services when waiting for new staff to be hired. It requires us to start all over again with relationship building, training, and orientation. That is a lot of wasted time and money!

Most people with developmental disabilities don't drive. So, losing a staff person can lead to unemployment because they wouldn't be able to make it to work. ALL of this has ripple effects on our emotional and mental wellbeing.

I understand the process of making decisions about where the money comes from and where it goes is very difficult for Senators. We were pleased when the House was able to find a balance and include a 2% COLA for the designated agencies which will go a long way to meet the needs of people with developmental disabilities and their families.

Before 1993, the state provided direct services to people at Brandon Training School. Since then the state has completely relied on a network of non-profits to meet the needs of people with disabilities. State workers get regular COLAs. It is only fair that since non-profits have the sole responsibility for providing services that they receive regular cost of living increases.

In closing we support the Governor's recommended new caseload money for developmental services.

Less than 30% of people who are eligible for services, actually get them. Here is why new money for services is VERY important. Most people who begin to receive services are in a crisis. For example:

- Parents get too old to take care of their sons and daughters
- People are living by themselves, or independently. But as they age, they need more support in life.
- People graduate from high school and as they transition in to adulthood, they need support to get started with a job.

Thank you for listening to the concerns of people with disabilities and their families.