

February 26, 2024

Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633

In Regards to the Basic Needs Budget

Dear Legislators,

My name is Shannon Dufour-Martinez and I have been a home care provider for 14 years. I started this work in my early 20s as a Children's Personal Care Provider, being paid \$9.78 per hour. At that time, I supported a school-age child who needed a devoted adult to help them navigate social situations, be safe in the community, and develop routines at home. Now, I support that same person as they attempt to find normalcy as an adult in a world that wasn't designed for them. We practice life skills like budgeting, identifying scams, meal preparation, and household responsibilities. I help them avoid mental health crises, reduce the impacts of isolation from neurotypical peers, and work through the many barriers they face daily as a person with a developmental disability. I also invite them into my home as a respite provider, when their parent needs time off. Imagine if you're 23-year-old could not spend the night home alone. Without this long-term relationship, this person's mental and physical health would greatly suffer, as would the well-being of their primary caregiver.

My partner and I live paycheck to paycheck in a world of rising costs. Many weeks I have to run my gas tank nearly empty, waiting for a paycheck to clear, or have to use the food shelf rather than the grocery store for essentials like eggs, cereal and fresh veggies. When my old car failed inspection this year, I took out yet another loan to buy a car that has already been on the road for 12 years... bringing my debt to income ratio into very dangerous territory.

Our home, a quaint and comfortable structure approaching its 230th birthday, needs repairs that we cannot afford. This winter we went without safe water for over three months after our well became contaminated. Because we don't have the resources to fund a water system overhaul, we had to piece together a solution, max out our credit cards, draw from our savings, and rely on the kindness of others to supply us with drinking water and access to

showers and laundry. This is not financial stability; a family living modestly with two full-time incomes should not have to struggle like this. Add to this the debt that we've already incurred to improve weatherization and fortify the foundation against increasingly wet conditions, and we are sapped. I don't know how we'll handle our upcoming need for a new roof...

However, I am one of the lucky ones in my field. I supplement my income as an independent homecare provider with a part-time position doing very similar work through a designated agency. This allows me to tap into employer-sponsored health insurance and retirement benefits. But it also means long days and expensive after-school and summer care for my child. Most homecare workers are earning just above minimum wage without these benefits, job protections, access to training or other supports that reduce barriers and increase wellbeing. My income, with these two jobs combined, is still not enough to meet my family's basic needs. Yet, we were recently told that we earn too much for Dr Dynosaur, which my 7-year-old has been on since infancy. This will mean another \$300 expense each month, without any increase to our income.

Homecare workers across Vermont are significantly underpaid, and our work exists in the shadows. State programs for vulnerable Vermonters set their budgets based on an hourly rate of \$14.05 per hour. This includes Self and Surrogate-Managed Programs under DAIL and DOH, such as Choices for Care, Care Attendant Services, Developmental Services, Brain Injury Program, and Children's Personal Care. **It's no wonder that the number of providers enrolled in state-funded programs has plummeted from over 7,000 in 2014 to 5343 today, based on payroll data. But the number of people needing this care is rising every year as our population ages.** Many of these people have long-term needs, and many others are seeking short-term support to step down from institutional or nursing-level care. As you've heard from hospitals and long-term care facilities, they do not have enough beds and staff to keep long-term borders. Skilled, compassionate homecare workers are a vital piece to the puzzle of caring for people with disabilities and the tens of thousands of older Vermonters who want to age safely in place.

Vermont Homecare United, the bargaining unit for these widely dispersed essential workers, recently proposed a livable wage BASED on the data in the most recent Basic Needs Budget report, and the state countered with an increase to \$14.36 per hour. This is not enough to live on, especially when much of the care we provide is dependent on our ability to maintain a home and vehicle that can be used for our work. It's crucial that the

Basic Needs Budget acknowledges the increasing rise in the cost of living. We need state leaders to **seriously consider the livable wage data reported here when creating budgets that fund these care services.** To say that a single Vermonter living in a rural community needs to earn a minimum of \$18.80 per hour to get by, then approve a budget that requires thousands of workers to earn less than that is a disgrace.

Please join us in making Vermont the kind of place where equity is a way of life, not just an empty term used by the privileged and well-compensated. All Vermonters are counting on you to set this bar and help us attain a better quality of life.

Sincerely,

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Vermont Homecare United, AFSCME 48023

Executive Board Member