

February 27, 2020

Testimony- Budget Reconciliation and Financing Act of 2020
HB 152- Oppose

My name is Linda Cades, and my 41 year old son Aaron receives home and community based services through DDA.

When he was 5 months old, Aaron suffered massive, irreversible brain damage as a result of a seizure disorder. Within a few months, we knew that he would be significantly disabled and require care throughout his life. We promised him then that we would always love him, no matter what. When we said that, we meant that we would do everything in our power to give him the best possible life he could have. We have done our best to do exactly that for over 40 years.

At 41, Aaron functions at about the level of a 5 year-old, so he cannot be left alone. That means that if either my husband or I cannot be there, someone else has to be there. Direct support workers employed with funding from DDA are the people who will be there for our family and thousands of other families like ours when we cannot be there now or when we are gone.

No parent can provide for a son or daughter with significant developmental disabilities alone. Aaron attended Kent County public schools until 1999 as a Level 5 special education student. When he turned 21, he entered Kent Center's day program. That program has helped him acquire skills and provides a safe place where he can be cared for by people trained to work with him. That was important both for him and for us.

After Aaron left the school system, my husband and I were both able to continue working because Kent Center was there to take care of Aaron while we worked. Without them, one of us would have had to stay home to care for our son. Because Kent Center's direct support workers were there, we were able to continue to work and be taxpayers.

Last year we made the difficult decision to apply for residential services. Aaron now lives in one of Kent Center's group homes in Chestertown. Direct support workers make sure he takes the medications he needs to prevent seizures. They make his meals and give him opportunities to be involved in our community like anyone else. They care for and about him, and that means everything to us.

41 years have gone by more quickly than we had ever thought they would. I am now 73 years old; my husband is 78. Neither of us is immortal. We know that, sooner or later, we will be gone, and someone else will have to take care of Aaron. We have no family members who can take over for us, so the direct support workers at Kent Center will have to be his family.

If Aaron were your son, what kind of people would you want caring for him when you are gone? Wouldn't you want the best possible, most highly trained, most caring people you could find to do that? How much do you think people like that would be worth when you were deciding what you should pay them? If you were me, these would be the people you would have to trust to make sure your son is safe and loved for the rest of his life when you are no longer there to protect him. Do you think such people are worth the minimum wage and no more? Should they get the same wage as a teen working in a fast food restaurant?

Here is what we are worried about. Every year, Kent Center depends upon Medicaid funding from Maryland and the federal government. Every year, the Maryland General Assembly has to weigh competing demands for that funding from a wide range of deserving people and organizations. All of us know that those funds are not unlimited.

Last year, when the General Assembly passed a bill gradually raising Maryland's minimum wage to \$15.00 per hour, you appropriated an additional 4% so that service providers like Kent Center could continue to pay their direct support workers at least a little above the minimum wage. By doing so, you acknowledged that service providers who care for our most vulnerable citizens must have the money they need to hire qualified, caring, dedicated people to do that work.

In Governor Hogan's current budget, that 4% that was promised has been cut to 2%; not nearly enough to achieve that goal. Without that additional money, Kent Center and every other service provider will struggle to hire and retain good people. If the money is about the same, McDonalds is always hiring, and the work is much easier. Some service providers will have to shut down.

At present, Kent Center employs about 150 people. 130 of those people are direct support workers. They are the backbone of Kent Center and every other service provider. While that sounds like a lot of people, Kent Center has 20 vacancies they need to fill right now if they could find qualified people. Hiring and retaining good staff is a challenge every day.

As a parent, I worry about whether Kent Center will be able to keep the doors open now and after my husband and I are gone. Without adequate funding, they will not be able to hire and retain people I would trust to care for my son when I am no longer here. 74 other families are also depending upon them. If they close, who is going to take care of our sons and daughters?

All of us are depending upon you to make sure Kent Center and other Maryland service providers will always be there to care for our sons and daughters. You can do that by making sure Kent Center and all of the other service providers have enough funding to hire and retain qualified people who are willing and able to care for Maryland's most vulnerable citizens.

As parents, we are counting on you. Please don't let us down. Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

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