

Dear Chair and Members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Tracie Feron, and I am the mother of Connor, a young man on the autism spectrum who self-directs his services through the Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA). I am writing in strong support of Senate Bill 583.

Self-direction is not a convenience for our family — it is a lifeline. It allows us to carefully recruit, train, and retain staff who understand Connor's communication style, sensory regulation needs, and behavioral supports. For individuals with significant support needs, consistency is directly tied to stability, health, and safety.

Last year the budget was almost fully restored to DDA. However, wage cuts and manual changes were still made by DDA. This had immediate and harmful consequences. As wages were reduced, we lost long-term, highly trained staff who had supported Connor for years. These were professionals who knew how to anticipate triggers, de-escalate behaviors, and maintain a safe environment. Their departure was not due to lack of commitment — it was due to unsustainable compensation.

As a direct result of losing experienced staff, Connor experienced an increase in behaviors. Disruptions in staffing do not simply cause inconvenience; they create instability that can jeopardize an individual's physical safety and emotional well-being. When unfamiliar or undertrained staff are placed in complex support roles, the risk of escalation increases. For medically and behaviorally vulnerable individuals, that risk is serious.

Since the wage cuts, we have struggled to recruit and retain qualified staff at the lower rates. The labor market does not support these wages, particularly for work that requires skill, patience, crisis management ability, and deep knowledge of disability supports. Chronic vacancies and turnover leave families scrambling to fill shifts, often working around the clock to prevent gaps in care. This is not sustainable.

Cuts to wages in self-direction are not abstract budget decisions — they have real-world consequences. They destabilize the workforce, undermine continuity of care, and place the health and safety of individuals with developmental disabilities at

risk. When experienced staff leave and cannot be replaced, individuals lose critical safeguards that protect their well-being.

DDA often describes self-direction as a "partnership." A true partnership prioritizes stability, transparency, and meaningful collaboration with families. Unilateral wage reductions and policy changes that weaken the workforce do not reflect partnership. They shift risk and burden onto families and, most concerning, onto the individuals who depend on these services for daily safety and support.

Senate Bill 583 is essential to restoring stability, protecting health and safety, and ensuring that self-direction remains a viable and responsible service model. Individuals with developmental disabilities deserve consistent, qualified support professionals. Families deserve a system that strengthens — not undermines — the very supports that keep their loved ones safe.

I respectfully urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 583.

Sincerely,
Tracie Feron