

DD Advocates Seek Pay Parity, Task Force Representation

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Developmental disability advocates highlighted several issues Thursday with provisions in the Senate's budget they say would create inequities.

Among their concerns is the \$1 contribution from county boards of developmental disabilities that would increase wages for direct support professionals serving individuals who use DD waivers, but not those who are in the Medicaid or Aging systems. (See [Gongwer Ohio Report, June 5, 2023](#))

The Senate's version of the two-year spending outline ([HB 33](#) Tracked) otherwise maintained the House proposal to increase wages for direct care workers to \$17 in FY24 and \$18 in FY25.

Early in the budget process, the DeWine administration emphasized the importance of pay parity for these workers, saying that any difference in pay could cause workers to shift to a higher-paying system.

[Senate Finance](#) Track Committee Chair [Sen. Matt Dolan](#) (R-Chagrin Falls) said in an interview earlier this week however that the Senate did not believe the \$1 difference would lead to job hopping.

"We felt the population of the worker who works in the DD community is there as much for the money as passion for the individual," he said. "We don't think those people are going to leave or that the extra \$1 will be so attractive as to move. That's a labor of love. We don't think that will happen."

Brittanie Maddox, disability rights advocate for the Ability Center of Greater Toledo, told the committee Thursday, however, that job hopping does exist and that the extra dollar "potentially creates an even bigger crisis." ([Testimony](#)) ([Video](#))

"We have heard from consumers on Medicaid Waivers have difficulties finding Direct Care Workers and keeping them employed," she said "Workers find out that they can make more

money working for DODD and often quickly leave which unnecessarily puts the individual with a disability in risky situations. I want to reiterate that workers in the DODD, Medicaid, and Aging system are all performing relatively similar jobs and tasks."

She urged lawmakers to raise all DSP wages to \$20 across the board.

"Due to the rising costs of living and the fact that many of these workers have families with multiple children, \$17 per hour is not going to provide them with financial stability," she said.

Alexia Kemerling, of the American Association of People with Disabilities, echoed Ms. Maddox's concerns.

"Including language in our budget that creates \$20/hr base wages for direct care workers, support professionals, and nurses that provide HCBS services under ODM, ODA, and DODD should be a no-brainer decision based solely on the fact that Ohioans have the right to receive services in their home and live in the community, and in order to do that, they need workers, and to have workers, those workers need to be paid livable wages," she said.

Both women also said the Senate-proposed Home and Community-Based Services Direct Care Worker Wages Task Force needs to be amended with a requirement that it include people who receive services.

"Without the direct input of people with lived experience, the state will not be successful in creating meaningful, sustainable change," Ms. Kemerling said.

They both also spoke about the Senate's removal of a House provision addressing supported decision making.

Ms. Maddox had been critical of the House's language saying mirrors guardianship without the protection from the courts. (See [Gongwer Ohio Report, May 5, 2023](#))

She said Thursday, however, that her group supports state-recognized supported decision making "so long as the law reflects an informal agreement does not give any authority or

decision-making power to the person who is supporting the individual with a disability without having to petition the Probate Court."

Ms. Kemerling clarified in an interview that they are worried that the House-approved language would work its way back into the document through the omnibus or in conference committee and that they would not have another chance to testify.

Ms. Maddox said: "Our concern is that the Senate did not address the problematic language that is in the House version; therefore it still exists and without any attempt to ensure that people with disabilities will potentially be exploited without direct Court oversight."

Another Senate addition drawing criticism from the targeted organization is a request for [Gov. Mike DeWine](#) to re-designate the entity assigned as the Ohio Protection and Advocacy System, as recommended by a joint committee earlier this year. (See [Gongwer Ohio Report, April 17, 2023](#))

Kerstin Sjoberg, executive director of the current P&A Disability Rights Ohio, submitted testimony urging the Senate to remove all provisions related to DRO as the state designated P&A.

"The amendments included in the substitute version of HB 33 conflict with the vision of the DD Act and work to interfere with the independence of the P&A," she wrote. "Retaliatory efforts, based on the work we do that is aligned with the desire disabled Ohioans and the requirements from our federal regulators, could have unintentional consequences on our ability to protect and advocate for the rights of people with disabilities which includes working to ensure people are free from abuse, neglect, and exploitation."

"Attacking an organization that's primary role is to protect the rights of disabled Ohioans should not be a priority of the General Assembly," she continued.

[Sen. Mark Romanchuk](#) (R-Ontario), who cochaired the joint committee that reviewed DRO, said in an interview that the reassignment was the top recommendation of the committee.

He noted that the provision does not compel the governor to do anything but is a request.

Asked whether he has spoken with Gov. DeWine about the redesignation, Sen. Romanchuk said, "I spoke with him about putting together the committee but not on this issue. He learned about it with everyone else."