

**Testimony RE: DDS Five-Year Plan**

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My name is Abu Bakr, and while I've done a lot of different types of work in my career, I've always worked in fields where I've had direct engagement with other people. This has helped me develop inclusive behaviors that made caring for individuals with disabilities a great fit.

About twelve years ago I decided to go to the certificate program for Community Health Worker. That showed me how many consumers with disabilities or chronic conditions have no choice but to use the emergency room for basic health care. That inspired me to begin working with consumers in a home-based setting, where I felt I could improve their quality of life.

I am here today to talk about the real-life challenges my consumers and I see in the DDS home care services. The DDS Five-Year Plan should have more specifics on how the agency will improve the home care program to lift up home care work and services up to the same good-quality standards that other DDS services have attained.

For the past 4 years, I've worked providing home care for two consumers with developmental disabilities. One consumer is becoming more independent and has moved into his own residence. I help him pay his bills, go shopping, make it to doctors' appointments. With my other consumer, he has more physical challenges, and I take him to therapy and doctors' appointments, and I've been trying to teach him basic hygiene and skills to be physically healthy. There are really no boundaries to this work; I am there to foster and support them in their independence in any way they need. For example, during a consumer's recent move, his electrical and gas weren't turned on in his new place like they were supposed to be; I ended up having to call the utility company to figure out how to get his gas turned on so he could use his stove. That's not exactly part of my job description, but I couldn't leave him without lights and heat all night!

But there are challenges to the work. My work is through the State of Connecticut's DDS waiver program, and is paid for by the State. With both my consumers, I am paid just \$13 and \$15.50 respectively. As a result, I have to take

on a third overnight consumer to make ends meet. Total each week I work 75 hours, which means it takes away a lot from my personal life. My kids are grown, but they want me around and I want to see my grandkids too. I work most holidays because health doesn't take a day off for holidays, and I want my consumers to be cared for. Some get to go home with parents, but not all consumers have family they can go to on a holiday. But I also do not receive any paid vacation time off or any bonus pay for working holidays.

Another challenge is the high cost of workers' compensation coverage. The State of Connecticut's home care program does not provide a group insurance policy to protect consumers like mine and the caregivers who serve them. So consumers must buy an expensive individual insurance policy, paying for it from their DDS budget in order for them to be able to hire me as a caregiver for over 25.75 hours per week. One of my consumers pays for workers' comp out of his DDS budget so that I can care full-time for him, but there are many other basic needs that he could spend that slice of his budget on if he did not have to fund an individual workers' comp policy. For example, he has to go to energy assistance because he can't otherwise afford his heating and electric bills.

My other client lost 6 hours per week due to a cut in his budget, which meant a schedule shift for both me and him. It was an adjustment for him to expect me at a different time of day, and whatever we did together had to be more prompt and precise. He felt I was rushing him, but I couldn't exceed the hours I was allotted. Not only that, I lost 6 hours of income per week, which was significant. Additionally, we can't always control the timing or length of doctors' appointments or therapy, which makes it difficult to fit all the needed appointments into a smaller window each week. He wants more time to fit his needs.

In closing, this work is a labor of love for me, but we need the support of DDS and lawmakers to ensure safe, high quality care for consumers and staff alike. Therefore, I'm calling on DDS and lawmakers to ensure adequate funding in consumers' budgets to make sure their needs are met. We also need a state-funded group workers' comp policy to protect all workers and consumers. Finally, caregivers like me need living wages to take care of our own homes and families.