

PUBLIC TESTIMONY

**New Jersey State Assembly
Budget Committee**

Public Hearing

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**Testimony Presented By
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Good Afternoon, Chairman Schaer and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Ralph Mastrangelo Jr. and I am a Trustee Emeritus of the Board of The Arc of Bergen and Passaic Counties... but most importantly, I am the father of Maureen, who we all call "Mo". My daughter is the love of my life and a 29 year old woman who lives with a developmental disability.

When Mo graduated from school, I can tell you that my wife and I were terrified about what would happen. Mo had some mental health challenges as well as her developmental disability. When she was in school, she had some difficult times. There was a two year period when she wouldn't leave the house, even to go to school. My wife or I had to be there with her round the clock.

We were so lucky that after graduation, Mo could get into a special needs day program at The Arc. Since the first day, she has been comfortable and happy there. She looks forward to going and can't wait to get on the van in the morning. The staff love her and have nick- named her "the Princess". My wife and I never worry about her while she is there.

May 19, 2016 we were very fortunate to reach the top of the waiting list and to get a place for Mo in a group home with another agency. For the first time in our lives we can leave the house together to go to the store or visit family. Before her move, one of us always had to stay home with Mo except when she was at her day program. We never did the ordinary things people do.

My wife and I are getting older and we thought that now, finally, we would have peace of mind... that we could stop worrying about what will happen to our precious daughter when we are not here.

But these programs depend on staff to provide her with proper care and support. These are the staff who love my daughter and care for her and make sure that she is safe, happy and productive every day. The staff who never get frustrated when Mo can't tell them

what is bothering her. The staff who have come to understand what her different sounds and gestures mean. The staff who see her strengths and celebrate her special qualities. The staff who are there in snowstorms and on holidays. The staff who will be responsible for my Mo when my wife and I are no longer here. The staff who call her "Mo-ie".

How can we have peace of mind when we know that the staff can't afford to work there? How can we have peace of mind when the staff can't afford to pay their rent and utilities and food and gas and health care? How can we have peace of mind when we know that these staff who love her and know her will eventually leave when they can't make ends meet? Who will take care of Mo?

Providers have a very high turnover rate, some as high as 44% and vacancy rates can be more than 20%.

There is a severe work force shortage and the State must take steps to resolve it so that parents like me can be assured that their sons and daughters will be well cared for. So that parents like me, can be assured that staff turnover and vacancy will not affect these critical services.

Funding must be allocated to increase direct support staff salaries by one dollar and twenty five cents (\$1.25) per hour every year for five years. We are asking that the 2018 budget include \$36 million in state dollars to be matched federally, so that year one of this plan can be implemented.

Mo can't wait any longer. It has been over eight years since there was funding to give these staff a living wage. Staff who have never made what they are worth, but do their jobs because they love what they do. Staff who dedicate their lives to help my daughter and her peers. Staff who have held up their part of the bargain but now are faced with having to leave the jobs they love because they can't afford to pay their rent. What will happen to Mo when they

quit to get a job that will allow them to feed their families? Who will care for Mo?

When we talk about helping people with developmental disabilities we can't forget that people like Mo, who are living in group homes and attending day programs depend on direct support staff for their very lives.

We have to honor the covenant made with these individuals and their families by ensuring that there is a stable work force. To do this we need you to include \$36 million in the 2018 budget so that we can implement year 1 of the plan to pay these critical staff a living wage.

Otherwise, who will care for Mo?