May 02, 2019

Senator Michelle Benson
3109 Minnesota Senate Building
95 University Ave W
St. Paul, MN 55155

Senator Jim Abeler
3215 Minnesota Senate Building
95 University Ave W
St. Paul, MN 55155

Representative Tina Liebling
477 State Office Building
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Chairs and Members of the Health and Human Services Conference Committee:

As you work to produce a single Health and Human Services bill, you will be considering several items of significant impact to Minnesotans with disabilities and the providers of these supportive services. As the Best Life Alliance, a coalition of individuals, families and organizations dedicated to the goal that Minnesotans with disabilities have the ability and resources to live their best life possible, we would like to thank you for the opportunity to comment on some of these important provisions.

First and foremost, we would like to thank both the House and Senate for prioritizing a Competitive Workforce Factor for the Disability Waiver Rate System (DWRS) in each of their Health and Human Services Omnibus bills. Current data shows wages for disability services Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) fall 17% behind wages of jobs with similar training and education requirements. The disability services workforce situation is bleak, with very high rates of turnover, vacancies, and overtime. The Competitive Workforce Factor is an important step in bridging this wage gap.

While the implementation of the Competitive Workforce Factor begins to address compensation for DSPs, it is critical that we don't allow wages to remain stagnant. The Best Life Alliance fully supports the House's position that would allow for 2% adjustments to the Competitive Workforce Factor in 2022 and 2024. These adjustments will further help address the current workforce crisis in Minnesota's community based disability service system.

Another important mechanism that will bring stability to Minnesota's disability services system is moving the currently scheduled automatic rate adjustment from every five years to every two years. We are grateful to both the House and Senate for making this important policy change and believe that using the most recently available data possible is the most sustainable approach moving forward.

We also understand the need, as a state and federally funded system, to provide accountability as to where disability services dollars are going. The Best Life Alliance supports the House's approach towards rate encumbrance as we feel it offers the clearest, most transparent and most robust method of tracking dollars.

Finally, we would like to speak to two provisions in the bill that cause us concerns. First, as providers work to put every available resource towards staff compensation, the Best Life Alliance opposes any fee increases that are not built into the Disability Waiver Rate System such as those included in the House bill. When established, the Disability Waiver Rate Setting System was meant to operate as a cost based system. We fully support the intent behind the state increasing its licensing activity, but believe the costs associated with this should be incorporated into the cost based rate system as the Senate language proposes. Secondly, as an Alliance dedicated to supporting Minnesotans with disabilities to live their best life, the limitations in access to disability waivers included in the Senate proposal would move us away from this goal.

Thank you again for this opportunity to comment on these critical provisions, for your dedication and work on behalf of Minnesotans with disabilities and for ensuring that increased compensation for Direct Support Professionals is a priority in the final Health and Human Services Omnibus bill. Through this you are supporting Minnesotans with disabilities and those who support them to live their Best Lives.

Sincerely,

The Best Life Alliance Coalition

cc: Senator Scott Jensen
Senator Paul Utke
Senator John Marty
Representative Rena Moran
Representative Jennifer Schultz
Representative Laurie Halverson
Representative Rod Hamilton