

## Testimony Before Congress on Advancing the Direct Support Workforce

Good Morning honorable members of this congress,

*As a constituent and proud citizen of this Kansas City area, I want to start by thanking you all for the opportunity to speak before you today. My name is James Mickens, and I am a Direct Support Professional and interim Executive Director of L'arche Heartland. L'arche Heartland is a small non-profit that supports adults with special needs. Our work can be difficult at times. But seeing our clients, or core members as we call them at L'arche, enjoy life with the dignity and respect they deserve is rewarding.*

*I stand here not just as an advocate for L'arche and my other colleagues in this field; but as someone who has witnessed firsthand the impact that quality direct support services can have on individuals living with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). Our work requires skills in communication, medical care, crisis intervention, advocacy, and joy.*

*As DSP or Direct Support Professionals, we manage medications, assist with daily living, support employment and community engagement, serve as a bridge between individuals with disabilities and the rest of society, and make lifelong friends with those we support. I'm going to see a new movie this weekend with one of the core members I met working as a live-in assistant at L'arche.*

*Because, despite what others may feel, the work we do as direct support is more than a job—it is a calling, an important service, a foundation for ensuring independence and welcoming for those we serve because we know if we were to end up in need, we'd want someone kind to take care of us. Unfortunately, the direct support workforce is in crisis. The demand for our services is growing, but the pool of qualified personnel is shrinking. Turnover rates among DSP's are alarmingly high, and vacancies are often left unfilled for months, sometimes years.*

*Please make no mistake, good and kind DSP's want to work and support others. They want to be a part of our mission to create better lives for the people we serve. The reality is, they can no longer afford to. Just THIS MORNING I had TWO members of my staff sobbing as they explained that they wanted to stay employed with us, but were afraid that they could no longer afford their rent if they did. For years, wages have remained stagnant across this industry. Access to benefits like health insurance is limited. We have been forced to ask these skilled professionals to take on highly specialized and essential work, but we can't offer them the resources and compensation they need to stay in the field and we often lose great **DSP's, that care deeply for those they provide care for** to higher paying jobs that DSP's themselves don't enjoy as much as they do being servant leaders.*

*The Kansas CARES Act (HB 2310) is a pivotal step in the right direction. By investing in a career ladder, credentialing, and workforce development, we can recruit and retain talented individuals who see direct support as a sustainable career rather than a stepping stone or last resort.*

*By offering **DSP's** access to healthcare, equitable pay across all state waiver programs, and performance-based incentives, we ensure that those providing care are not struggling to care for themselves.*

*This is not just a workforce issue. It's about setting up those who need support as they age, something all of us may need one day, and great employees to take care of our children, our parents, and maybe ourselves. If we fail to invest in direct support professionals, we will fail those in our society who rely on the services of others to lead meaningful lives. When turnover rates are high, relationships suffer. Consistency and trust are crucial in this work, and constant staff changes disrupt the lives of those we support, leaving them vulnerable and isolated.*

*It is vital that we recognize Direct Support Professionals as the professionals we are. Yet, without adequate investment in our workforce, we are at risk of losing the very people who make this work possible.*

*I urge you to support the Kansas CARES Act and any further measures that prioritize the strengthening of this essential workforce. We have the opportunity to build a system that values both the individuals receiving services and the professionals providing them. This is not just an investment in a workforce—it is an investment in our state's present and future, and in the values we hold as citizens of this incredible country.*

*Thank you again for your time and consideration.*