

Chris O'Brien

From: Ruff, Marissa <MRuff@sevenhills.org>
Sent: Tuesday, May 5, 2026 11:57 AM
To: House Finance Committee
Subject: HB 8183--SUPPORT

Importance: High

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Dear Chair Abney and Members of the House Finance Committee:

My name is Dr. Marissa Ruff, and I am writing in two capacities: as Vice President of Seven Hills Rhode Island, where I help oversee services and supports for Rhode Islanders with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and as a constituent who lives in Pascoag. I urge the Committee to pass HB 8183 and fully fund disability services this year.

I want to speak plainly about what is happening on the ground.

Three years ago, when the General Assembly raised reimbursement rates, we saw the impact almost immediately. Applications came in. Experienced staff who had left the field came back. For the first time in a long time, we could fill shifts with the kind of consistent, qualified people the individuals we support deserve. It was the most hopeful period for our workforce I had seen in years.

That progress is gone. As of today, we are back to record numbers of staff leaving — not because they want to, but because they have to. The cost of living in Rhode Island has continued to climb, and the wages our reimbursement rates can sustain have not kept pace. Direct support professionals are taking on second and third jobs just to make ends meet — to pay rent, cover groceries, and keep up with utility bills. The result is exhaustion. The result is burnout. The result is good people walking away from a job they love because love does not pay the bills.

When workers burn out and turnover spikes, the people who lose the most are the Rhode Islanders we are here to support. Quality of care drops. Continuity — the relationships that takes months and years to build with people who have complex support needs — is broken every time a staff member leaves. And when quality of care drops, the risk of harm to some of the most vulnerable people in our state goes up. That is not a theoretical concern. It is a daily one.

The cost of providing high-quality services and the rates at which the state reimburses providers have grown grossly misaligned, and the gap is only getting worse. We cannot recruit against employers who offer higher wages, signing bonuses, and predictable schedules. We cannot retain skilled workers when their paychecks force them to choose between this work and their families' financial stability. Providers across the state are being asked to deliver more, to higher standards, with less. That math does not work, and the people who pay the price are people with disabilities and the workforce that stands beside them.

HB 8183 is the bill that begins to close this gap. It is an investment in the workforce that is the backbone of our system. It is an investment in the safety, dignity, and community lives of the more than 11,000 Rhode Islanders served by this sector. And it is an investment in an industry that already returns hundreds of millions of dollars in wages and economic activity to our state every year.

I have seen what adequate funding makes possible. I have also seen what happens when funding stops keeping pace — and we are watching that erosion happen in real time right now. Please do not wait for another crisis in this system to act.

I respectfully urge the Committee to pass HB 8183 and fully fund disability services in this year's budget. The people we support, the workers who stand beside them, and the families who count on this system every day need this Committee's leadership now.

Thank you for your time, and for your service to Rhode Island.

Sincerely,

Dr. Marissa Ruff

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