

My name is Ron Fugate. I live in Overland Park, KS. My 42-year-old son, Nick, is intellectually/developmentally disabled. He lives at Lakemary Center in Olathe where he has resided for the past 15 months.

Nick receives supports he needs to live and work as independently as possible. The employees of Lakemary are hard working, dedicated and compassionate people who are charged with the responsibility of ensuring my son and others are kept safe and well, receive nutritious meals, are socially active in their community and experience the highest level of dignity in their lives.

The people parents like me rely on to provide such high levels of care for our sons and daughters sadly are among society's lowest paid workers. Given a choice, it's a lot less demanding to flip burgers and fry potatoes than to provide love, support and a safe environment for the most vulnerable people of our state. Yet this is what the Lakemarys of our state face everyday as they compete to fill their ranks with quality employees. In the short while Nick has been at Lakemary, I've seen a parade of employees leave for better paying jobs, and I've seen positions go unfilled for lengthy periods of time.

Why, after nearly a decade have we not seen fit to offer a pay raise, a competitive wage to these providers dedicated to promoting quality of life for others? It defies good business logic.

When I returned to Kansas a dozen years ago, I had high expectations that this state was on the cutting edge when it came to caring for the developmentally disabled. I saw its K-12 special education programs as being second to none. But I've also seen what happens when these special needs kids leave high school. Their prospects for entering society as productive citizens seems to grow dimmer by the day.

We are better than this. It was Mahatma Ghandi who said, "The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members." I urge you to show those who provide services to this state's most vulnerable members that you care by ensuring they receive a pay increase, by ensuring that providers can compete for competent employees, by ensuring that parents can entrust the care and support of their loved ones to reliable, trained and qualified support staff. You have the power to do this by voting yes for Senate Bill 173.