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Monday, March 15, 2021

Testimony in Support of HB 2046

Honorable Chair and Distinguished Members of the Committee,

My name is Christine Cook and I have worked as a Direct Support Professional (DSP) for a total of 6 years. I started my career as a DSP in June of 2015 at Lake Mary Center. I moved into a position as a DSP at COF in July of 2016 where I am still employed. As a DSP I provide support to individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to empower them to live as independently as possible in our communities.

In my time as a DSP, I have had the opportunity to support many people who don't have the love and care that a family provides. In the years I have been at COF, I have developed such strong and trusting relationships with these individuals and with many of them, I have formed a caring bond that they truly need and miss. Being able to work with the same individuals for years has allowed me to get to know them. I know what upsets them and what makes them happy. When they are struggling, I know how to help make it better even when they can't tell me what they need.

Through the past 5 years, I have also supported some individuals with significant behavioral challenges such as: physical aggression, verbal aggression, elopement, theft, sexual inappropriateness, inability to communicate verbally, etc. Many of these individuals with complex needs have required one on one support in order to be able to live safely in their communities. In the past 5 years, I have provided one on one support to 4 different individuals with complex needs. My ability to form rapport and get to know these individuals was significant in allowing me to support them in their daily life and to help de-escalate them when they became triggered.

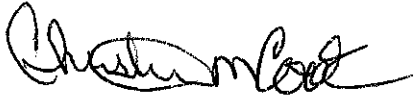
I have a passion for the care and support I provide as a DSP and want to be able to continue to build my career in this field. Thus far, being able to stay in the field has required significant personal and financial sacrifice. I am the sole financial provider of my family. The weight of this responsibility has been significant as I cared for a medically fragile partner and a 10 year old step-daughter, especially on such a low income. Oftentimes, I have had to work overtime to supplement my wages in order to scrape by financially. I have worked an average of 60 hours a week for multiple years in a row. Many days I would leave at 10pm from a shift to return at 2am to finish an overnight awake.

Even working all of these hours, I still had to make many sacrifices. I haven't purchased new clothes for myself in years. When my car broke down, I couldn't afford to get it fixed and had to rely on a family member for transportation to work and necessary appointments for my partner for over 4 months. We were only able to get a car to replace the one that broke down due to a family member allowing me to make payments to purchase theirs. My partner and I always had dreams of being able to buy a house large enough to have family visit and to start a small animal rescue. On my income, we were never able to make this dream a reality.

The many days of long hours were necessary in order to make ends meet but they were difficult for my family to accept and understand. Through my years, I have had to miss many birthdays, family functions, holidays, school activities, etc. My step-daughter struggled with understanding my absence. When I explained that I had to work in order to afford things, she still

struggled to understand because she often had to go without participating in extracurricular activities or birthday parties because we just couldn't afford it. Not being able to afford the extra things was very difficult but it is even harder looking back and realizing all the time I was forced to miss. I lost my partner this past January to COVID. You never realize how fleeting life is until you lose someone you loved. It breaks my heart to look back at all the moments I missed that I will never get back.

In the past few months, I have come to realize that as a DSP, I am not the only one providing support. The individuals I serve have provided support through my loss. They have taught me about patience, resilience, and advocacy. I am thankful for the things I have learned in this job and for how strong it has made me mentally, physically, and emotionally. I look forward to continuing to grow as a professional in this field. I hope that you will take the opportunity to invest in this field as well.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Christine Cook". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "C" and "C".

Christine Cook
Direct Support Professional