

United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

The Long-Term Care Workforce: Addressing Shortages and Improving the Profession

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Testimony of Nicholas Smith

Philadelphia, PA

Chairman Casey and Ranking Member Braun, Senator Fetterman, and members of the Senate Aging Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify before the Committee.

My name is Nicholas Smith, and I am honored to be here today to recognize the immeasurable value and critical role of direct support professionals in supporting people with intellectual disabilities and autism to live meaningful lives in the community. I am a direct support professional, or DSP, at SPIN, an organization that provides lifespan services for over 3,000 people with intellectual disabilities and autism in Pennsylvania. I have been in this field for over 25 years, and with SPIN for over 17 years.

I also have the honor of serving on the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services Office of Developmental Programs' Information Sharing and Advisory Committee, the Pennsylvania Advocacy and Resources for Autism and Intellectual Disability, the Pennsylvania Advocacy and Resources for Autism and Intellectual Disability, and the SPIN Board of Directors. I am also a member of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 1739.

I attended Penn State University and when I finished, I went into a Quality Control, Senior lead position in manufacturing. However, the job did not feel fulfilling, and I felt like I wasn't living up to my full potential. My parents did not think so either. Later, I worked for an organization providing supports to kids and teens between the ages of 12-20 years old, which was where I fell in love with supporting people and knew this is what I wanted to do. When the organization closed, I moved back to Philadelphia and got connected to SPIN. I interviewed for and was offered a management position in residential services, however, I thought I would like to apply for the DSP position instead.

The interviewer was surprised at my turning down the management position, but I wanted to work more closely with people in their homes. The rest is history. I immersed myself in working in SPIN homes. As a direct support professional, I support the specialized needs of individuals. More specifically, I support the ever-changing physical, emotional, personal, communication, and recreational needs of individuals. I am proud to be there both during milestone times in people's lives, like achievements, and during challenging times, like illness and death.

In one of my first roles, I was asked to move to a home that was being opened for two men with serious mental health disorders and intellectual disabilities. I remember when one of the men I

helped support got his first job at a local deli, he couldn't believe it, he had been turned down by so many businesses before. When this would happen, we would spend time talking about "staying positive and continuing to move forward." I was able help him look for more opportunities to submit his resume and reassure him that through his frustrations, he will find success."

Throughout my career as a direct support professional, I have worked many hours a week, usually picking up about 3 extra shifts a week for about 65-70 hours in total per week. Also in my role, I am required to meet the extensive requirements and demands to be a direct support professional related to training, documentation, and job accountabilities. I also attend and participate in regular "house meetings," Individual Support Planning, staff meetings, and family meetings. These meetings are particularly important given that direct support professionals are the direct support system and line of communication to the families and their needs.

At SPIN specifically, I have voluntarily enrolled in SPIN's first cohort of the National Alliance for Direct Support Professional E-Badge Academy credentialing program. I have achieved my credentials as a DSP-1, which involved over 50 hours of accredited education as well as gathering 11 experience testimonials. I am currently working on my credentials as a DSP-2. I chose to pursue these credentials because it gives me and other direct support professionals the ability to show we are fully competent, proficient, and highly qualified in providing life-long care. It highlights the fact that we have the knowledge, training and skill set to do all of these things.

I think access to worker supports and protections is also really important. Direct support professionals should get to work in settings with great management and support systems. At SPIN we have a department called Deployment Services, which will find coverage for a worker if we are sick, need to call out or if other shifts need to be filled and we want overtime. This department makes sure I'm supported and can take time off if I need it, but I know that not all DSPs have these benefits. Every long-term care worker should have the ability to take sick time or a mental health day when we need it.

I am also lucky to not have experienced any workplace violence, but I've heard stories of things that have happened to other DSPs I know. I think it's important to make sure that every workplace is a safe place that allows us to do our jobs and support the individuals we provide services for.

I'm thankful to work for a place that feels like a community and supports me when I am going through hard times. I recently lost my father and when I was going through it our corporate officer for residential was there for me when I needed someone. He was someone I could turn to talk through things. By having him there, I could open up to about how I as feeling, but also continue on and support my residents.

I'm thankful to have these supports, but I still have challenges. As I previously mentioned, I work nearly 65-70 hours a week. I am a single father and I have my parents with me, who help

so much. However, due to my work, I have missed family events, nieces' and nephews' recitals, and school functions. The tradeoff is that I am able to make more money and provide for my family. Even when my daughter asks, "Dad, will you be off on Sunday," I have to answer no and that I have to work more to make more money. I do my best on my one day off each week, Mondays, to hold that time just for her. But when we try to take family vacations, I have had to miss them until I was able to accrue enough leave time. I love my job, I have been blessed to work at a place where I can grow and where I make a difference but it's a struggle to stay because I don't make a living wage.

A lot of people are leaving this field to make more money. The national average for DSP wages is only \$15.43 in long-term care. We spend time training new hires only to lose them because they cannot make a living wage. Other industries are offering more money, and while people want to stay in this field, they cannot make ends meet. Pennsylvania has a long waitlist for home and community-based services, and this is due to the workforce crisis.

What keeps me up at night? Working and making sure I can afford to maintain and support myself and my family. For example, my daughter was able to go overseas because I worked crazy amounts of hours. If I don't want to let her down, I have to work those extra three shifts each week so I can try and get ahead. When I just work 40 hours, I see my check and I worry again, do I have enough? My daughter is currently looking at colleges and her top focus right now is Penn State. Penn State will require a lot of money, even when she gets scholarships.

However, I also need to be mindful of working too much, so I do not risk the people I am supporting or myself. It takes a lot of energy to be a DSP, and you are required to always be on your A-game. This job is getting tougher as I get older. I am not 30-year-old Nick anymore, I am 47, and I feel the effects of the time and intensity this role requires.

In closing, I want to emphasize how important it is to recognize and prioritize direct support professionals as valued professionals who deserve the right to earn a living wage for themselves and their families. I want to thank you for your time and your championing of this necessary and critical workforce bill.

Thank you.