

**To: Senate Ways and Means Committee**  
**From: Cottonwood, Inc.**  
**Date: 3-7-17**

Kansas once led the nation in valuing its citizens with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), legislating a service system that promoted choice, integrity and inclusion. However, nine years of zero rate adjustments, the failure of KanCare, and looming federal mandates have created an unstable HCBS system that is negatively impacting the lives of Kansans with I/DD. In order for the system to survive reimbursement rates must be increased so that we can fairly compensate direct support professionals (DSPs) for their indispensable contributions toward carrying out the state's vision.

DSPs are deeply committed to the people they support and care for daily. DSPs provide essential life preserving services willingly and respectfully. They help others breathe, eat, bathe, go to the bathroom, hold down jobs, and live meaningful, contributing lives. At Cottonwood, most support staff provide these services for a starting wage of \$9.50/hour. *At this wage, employees struggle to stay afloat.* Many hold two, sometimes three jobs to make ends meet.

The quality of supports and services received by those we serve is directly related to our ability to recruit, hire, and retain quality DSPs. *Currently we have 30 DSP vacancies.*

*In order to find enough staff to meet the intensive support needs of consumers in a highly competitive hiring environment, service providers are considering applicants for hire who probably would have been passed over 10 years ago.* When positions are vacant for up to months at a time, consumers are supported by substitute staff who strive to make sure that at least essential needs are met. However, under these circumstances, consumers lose valued rituals, routines and the confidence that the people caring for them really see and appreciate each person's individual preferences and desires. *Consumers may not know from one day to day the name of the person who will drive them home after work, administer their medications, assist them with meals and perform intimate personal care.*

If we should become disabled and dependent upon the actions of others, how confident would we be that we would get what we need if our staff changed daily, if we weren't able to form a lasting relationship with a person charged with meeting our most essential needs? When no one knows us, who will bother to find out what we like for breakfast, what our favorite color is, that we are frightened by storms? Will anyone notice that our appetites have changed? That we have unexplained bruises? When these seemingly small things are lost, lives are disadvantaged.

We put a tremendous amount of effort into hiring staff that will fulfill their complicated and sometimes high risk responsibilities in a safe and ethical manner. We perform

background checks, we train and retrain, and we terminate employees if care is being compromised. **We do this in an environment that operates 24 hours a day and 7 days a week in more than 50 settings across Lawrence.** We work around second and third jobs and school schedules and the disruptions and crises that creep into lives of staff who earn near poverty wages. We yearn for the day when we can offer fair compensation so that we can stabilize the service delivery system and strengthen and plan for the future.

The potential outcome of the failure to carry out staff obligations could be life or death. These services are provided in integrated settings distributed throughout our communities. While this decentralization supports consumers in living lives that look like our own, it also demands that DSPs be able to independently make sound decisions, respond effectively in emergencies and provide delegated nursing tasks without on-site supervision. Staff are entrusted with helping consumers manage their money and property. They are accountable for minimizing risks to consumers, even when consumers are resistant to their efforts and engage in injurious aggressive behavior.

The work that is done by a DSP is high touch. Each time a hand reaches out to administer medication, cook a family-style meal, button a blouse, write a note to the nurse, or soothe a trouble away, **Kansans with I/DD deserve to be touched by a professional whose work and responsibility is respected, valued and compensated fairly.**

This system instability under which we are currently operating has placed our organization in an unsustainable position. We cannot wait another year. We need your help. Please support SB 173.