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TO: Carolyn McGinn, Chair, and Members of the Ways and Means Committee
FROM: Colin McKenney, CEO, Starkey, Inc.
RE: Support for SB 348

Good morning Madam Chair and Members of the Committee.

I am Colin McKenney, and I serve as the CEO of Starkey, Inc. in Wichita. I am speaking in favor of SB 348 today, and will briefly explain how this bill would be a key step to help address a crisis that affects not only Starkey, but providers of disability services across our state.

As one of the larger providers of I/DD services in Kansas, Starkey served more than 500 people with qualifying disabilities last year. **Because many people we serve require nearly constant assistance, the work we do requires us to have approximately 450 full and part-time positions to support people 24 hours a day, seven days a week.** While you may not think about it until you are personally affected, there is no substitute for a capable and caring person when you require assistance with eating, bathing, getting dressed, going to the bathroom and so many other necessary processes each day. We simply cannot follow the model that so many retail stores are using to employ fewer people and replace them with do-it-yourself stations. It is the need for assistance that allows individuals we work with to qualify for these services.

In addition to more typical daily support needs, Starkey and other providers of I/DD services have also had to become skilled at meeting the needs of those who can be very challenging to serve, including aggressive and destructive behaviors that are often related to mental illness. Individuals with these types of diagnoses would have more commonly been served in state hospitals in the past. Our present lack of available hospital capacity and priority of community inclusion mean that our employees need increasing levels of training and are also expected to deal with very challenging situations to try and prevent injury or property damage.

Although **Starkey requires 450 positions, we have never had nearly that many filled. A more typical number for us is 360 to 370 filled positions, which means we commonly have 80 or more full and part-time vacancies.** Since most of those positions are necessary for the health and well-being of individuals we serve, we constantly work to find employees who are willing to work overtime to help us cover the vacant positions. Most employees won't complain about

being asked to work a little overtime, but covering so many vacancies goes way beyond a “little overtime.” During 2019 we had employees who worked more than twice the typical hours of a full-time **employee, with the majority of those being overtime hours.** We are grateful they are willing to make that sacrifice, but working that many hours takes a toll on them and their ability to perform at the highest level.

Numerous factors affect our ability to fill positions and retain employees. Since our homes and program sites are spread all over our community, employees commonly do very challenging work without a supervisor or team of coworkers close by to lend a hand. **Our direct support professionals (DSPs) have to be good with interpersonal skills, domestic duties, personal care, crisis intervention, situation de-escalation, driving, administering medications, meeting a wide range of medical needs, paperwork, and countless other responsibilities.** And, they have to do all these things at a high level or risk being investigated if there is any suspicion that someone we serve has been abused, neglected or exploited.

The fact that these jobs are challenging and stressful, and that days can be very long doesn't necessarily distinguish them from other types of work. **What sets them apart is that these amazing DSPs go through ten different background checks, substance screens, physical capacity testing, weeks of training and numerous challenges in the workplace, and then often earn \$10 per hour or less.** If making that wage were the only reason for showing up to work each day, there are many other jobs that would offer better pay, less scrutiny and fewer expectations.

In our retention efforts, we provide Starkey employees the chance to give feedback through an annual satisfaction survey. There is always helpful feedback, but one particular question jumped out at me this year. **When current employees were asked what factors they believe cause employees to leave our organization, more than 75% of survey respondents indicated pay was the leading reason or contributed to the decision to leave.** Wages are not the only factor that prevent us from hiring and retaining employees who are well-suited to be outstanding providers of personal care, but our employees who do this difficult work each day have been very clear that better wages are a necessary first step in resolving our workforce crisis.

SB 348 could be a game-changer for our organization and so many others across the state. Any additional funding we receive is helpful, of course, but it is time for a more substantial effort to raise wages and make the work that we do a career and not just a temporary job. The 7% increase referenced in the bill for FY21 would be sufficient to allow Starkey to raise wages by \$1 per hour, and hopefully also hold the line on costs so employees aren't having to spend their wage increase just to maintain status quo on health insurance and other benefits.

Having the ability to increase wages by \$1 would be a substantial improvement for us, but being able to raise our base wage to \$11 is only a first step toward achieving a level of compensation that is more appropriate for the demands of the jobs we are attempting to fill. If

SB 348 is passed and provides increases of 7/6/5% over the coming three years, our organization could take a big step forward in paying a wage that would finally allow people to see this work as a career.

My original conclusion to this testimony noted the benefits of passing this bill, which would allow us to fill many of our vacancies over the next three years, lower the stress level of our employees, and improve the quality of care we provide. Those are important goals for our organization, but fail to convey what is really at stake. **To be blunt, lives are at stake.** We know, for example, there are situations when our employees physically intervene to help someone who is choking on food. We know they put their own safety at risk to intervene when someone's behaviors are out of control in hopes that they can prevent that individual, someone else we serve, or a member of our community from being seriously harmed. And, they will intervene when someone is having a medical emergency to administer the right medication or procedure to help that person avoid a more serious crisis. These represent life-or-death situations that happen without news coverage or fanfare all over our state. **Because we support very vulnerable individuals around the clock and every day of the year, part of what we ask our employees to do is to prevent harm and save lives. As you consider SB 348, we are now asking the same of you.**

Thank you for your time today, and I would be happy to respond to any questions you may have at the appropriate time.