

Dear Legislators

My name is Diane Voss. My son's name is Shawn Voss. He is 27 years old, struggles with autism, and is classified as nonverbal. He now lives in a group home in Hays, Kansas. He relies on trained staff who understand his limited communication. Direct support staff is needed on a daily basis to help perform tasks that you and I may take for granted such as eating, bathing, dressing, and going out.

Three years ago, Shawn was given the opportunity to have a life away from his parents. He moved to a group home in Hays where he and five other males with disabilities live. There has been a continual change in staff ever since. My son is very happy most of the time but due to the limited communication, Shawn struggles to make his wants and his needs known to them.

This last year has been more of a struggle because of the necessary limits that have been put in place for the group homes due to COVID. These limitations were put in place to keep the individuals safe. COVID-19 placed a huge burden on individuals and staff. Individuals were restricted to their homes and all outings were drastically reduced. As staff members were exposed to COVID and illness in the public, individuals in the homes were at risk for becoming sick as well. When individuals became sick, staff members were at risk for taking care of them. This has been a very concerning situation for both.

As parents, we know we will not always be here to take care of our son. Our hope is for Shawn to be comfortable and safe in his home surrounded by quality staff who are knowable in his needs. We want him to be part of the community giving his best for a wonderful life. He deserves that along with all the other disabled individuals in the community.

I had the opportunity to ask a few of the staff why they were leaving. I was told that the pay wasn't enough to cover their bills. A few of them have other jobs because what they were making in the group homes was not enough. As a parent, I want quality staff looking after my loved one. If you had a loved one in a group home, you would want quality staff helping them live their best life too. The restrictions that were put in place due to COVID-19 kept individuals in their group homes with only staff coming in to take care of them. In some cases, staff members have put themselves at risk taking care of individuals that have been sickened with Covid-19. Pretty risky for them. They take that risk because they care. As a society, it is our duty to meet the needs of those most vulnerable, and that means supporting the community system that serves them.

More funding is needed to keep trained staff in your homes helping these individuals, like my son, achieve a happy life! This bill is a practical, common sense approach and solution. As this bill helps to meet these needs, there are still the needs of those who are waiting for services, approximately 4,500 individuals. There is a solution identified in this bill for them as well.

Thank you for your kind attention, consideration, and support.

Sincerely,



Diane Creevan Voss