

My name is Robert Matuszak, and I am a 56-year-old person living in Virginia Beach with a developmental disability resulting from a spinal cord injury that I sustained at the age of 17, almost 39 years ago. Because I was younger than 22 when I became paralyzed, I meet the definition of a person with a developmental disability and have a DD Waiver. I am a recent graduate from Old Dominion University and currently serve on the Advocacy, Outreach, and Training committee as a first-year board member with the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities. I accepted this appointment because I wanted to use my [disabled] life struggles and accomplishments to help improve the lives of other Virginians with developmental disabilities. I come here today not as a representative of the Board, but instead as a disability advocate whose purpose is to give voice to the underserved and unheard disability and elderly population whose needs are not being met through Virginia's community-based services.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is responsible for the deaths and illnesses of many of my fellow Americans it has also had devastating effects on the delivery of community-based services due to a significant shortage in caregivers. This shortage in caregivers has placed the health and living conditions of people with disabilities and the elderly at risk, especially those of us living alone with limited emergency backup. This pandemic is two years old and one of the main reasons for this caregiver shortage is money. Caregivers were underpaid prior to the pandemic, and they still are today. The current hourly wage is simply not enough incentive to bring them back into this field. However, this caregiver crisis is not limited Virginia. The United States is facing a caregiver crisis and this crisis is not getting the attention that it deserves. As a consequence of this silence, the disabled and elderly are at greater risk of being forced into nursing homes. At least, this is my current situation. I no longer have an in-home or personal care agency and it is exceedingly difficult to hire a caregiver through the Consumer-Directed Services program for only \$11.81. On December 10, 2021, my DD Support Coordinator submitted a "Regional Support Team (RST) referral" to the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS). It is my understanding that the RST referral process is a final effort to acquire community assistance for an individual with a developmental disability facing nursing home placement. I assumed the receipt of an RST referral meant that the problem was dire, thus deserving priority intervention on behalf of the RST. Because we heard nothing from the RST, I emailed them on December 28 only to find out that they would not be reviewing my referral until January 20, 2022. I was speechless when I received this feedback. We are talking about an underserved population facing nursing home placement and the typical review takes over a month. How is a developmentally disabled individual supposed to survive in their home without community-based services or a caregiver? Obviously, the RST has placed this burden on the individual's family. If the family wanted this burden, then there never would be a need for RST referrals. My family is older than me and dealing with their own health issues, families, and jobs. Asking for their help is not always an option, nor should it be. Only because I shared the date of the review for my referral with a colleague and mentor, my referral was elevated to priority status after she brought this issue to the attention of someone at DBHDS. Nonetheless, I am confused as to why priority status is not the standard practice for the RST referral.

I will know if nursing home placement is my fate soon. Should I be placed in a nursing home I will lose my fully furnished apartment, wheelchair-accessible van, Section-8 voucher, food stamps, and DD Waiver. I will also lose all the freedoms that can only be experienced in the community. This angers me beyond words. Why must I or any other person who is dependent on community-based services be institutionalized because our government does not value our lives enough to remedy the caregiver crisis by increasing the hourly wage? It has already been proven that it cost taxpayers less when people with disabilities and the elderly live in the community versus being warehoused in institutions. I already know the horrific conditions that accompany life in a nursing home. Due to a series of medical complications, I was forced into nursing homes at the age of 41 where I remained for two and a half years. However, through the Money Follows the Person program I returned to the community in 2009 and rebuilt my life from nothing. The thought of losing all of this because the state of Virginia does not value my life, or the disabled and elderly populations lives enough to set a pay rate that is competitive with the mainstream, corporate world angers me. Naturally, the uncertainty of my future has been very upsetting for me. Still, I wonder how many other Virginians with disabilities, or the elderly have been or still are underserved and facing the same fate as me. We deserve immediate action from you to take action on this caregiver crisis and you can start by raising the hourly rate for caregivers today. Raising the hourly rate for caregivers to a livable wage can be accomplished by taking unspent money from a lesser deserving program. For example, my city saved before and after school programs by moving unused salary dollars over to childcare workers resulting in wages increasing from \$9.50-\$14.89 hourly up to \$15-\$18.50. You have the power to end the caregiver crisis in Virginia by raising the hourly rates to a livable wage thus giving caregivers an incentive to return to their role of caregiving. If you do not act on this today, then the Supreme Court's ruling on the Olmstead Act in 1999 will have been for nothing and institutions will once again warehouse the disabled and elderly who rightfully deserve to live in the community. I can submit to you a written version of my story and am available to speak at any hearings that you and your colleagues may have in addressing this caregiver crisis and the future delivery model for Virginia's community-based services that are desperately needed by the disability and elderly population, especially those who are unheard and underserved. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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