

Guest Post: Why Paying Caregivers Well Matters

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My name is Kirsten. I love to read. I graduated from college magna cum laude. I enjoy interacting with my nephews and niece. I love being part of my church communication team working to spread information and goodwill in the community. People appreciate my smile. I also happen to have cerebral palsy, and none of the above would be possible if someone was not available to get me out of bed in the morning, help with toileting, bathing, dressing, grooming, and fix breakfast. All the ways I have fun, and all the ways I contribute to the lives of others, would be unavailable to me. Approximately 10%-12% of the United States population has a permanent disability that impacts their activities of daily living.

Despite the high demand for direct support professionals, this work is often an option of last resort for job seekers because they usually work long hours doing very physically demanding work with very low wages. The national average wage for direct support professionals is less than \$10 per hour. With starting salaries at many businesses now around \$15-\$18 per hour, disability service providers have found it increasingly difficult to hire and retain staff to meet the needs of their clients.

I do not enjoy needing help with activities of daily living. If it were possible, I would choose to do things like toileting, bathing, and dressing by myself. But since removing my disability is not an option, the question becomes, "How do I live well in spite of it?" Life in general can be stressful, but when you are concerned about getting your physical needs met, it adds another layer of stress. Concerns about your physical wellbeing can prevent you from taking

opportunities that could be possible with proper support, like going on outings and gatherings, which develops relationships. Better pay for caregivers leads to more opportunities for people with disabilities to engage in the community and the world.

Good pay for direct support professionals will attract good people to the field and keep them. It is a hard job and takes a special kind of person, one who is gentle and patient and persistent and kind and willing to help with daily living tasks. Such a person should be well-paid for the essential work they do. If they're well-paid, they're more likely to stay. If more caregivers stay longer, that translates over time into less people you need to train and less explanations you need to give. In 2019, before the pandemic hit, a national study found that there was a 43% turnover rate among direct support professionals in the United States. The pandemic has increased the percentage, and earlier this year a national study found that two-thirds of disability service providers were turning away clients because they didn't have enough staff. This leaves people with disabilities without the help they need.

Lest this blog post be all doom and gloom, I'll end with a happy reason to pay caregivers well. I cherish many memories with my caregivers. There is a closeness that can develop between caregivers and clients. If trust is established and maintained, it can feel like you're with a good friend. Since I need help so often throughout the day, we have lots of time to talk. Caregivers get to know a person's likes and dislikes, and who knows, they may discover they enjoy the same books or shows. When a client and caregiver enjoy spending time together, the care becomes a part of life, and both are benefiting from the relationship that is being built.