

Mr(s). Chair and Members of the Committee,

*“There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.”*

*- Desmond Tutu -*

My name is Linnea Devine, I am a mother of 3 young boys, Licensed Clinical Social Worker & Mental Health Consultant for many school districts in the state of Minnesota. I am testifying on behalf HF 1604/SF 1765 and HF 1626/SF 1593 as both a mother to my sweet 3 year old Ollie who is on the Autism Spectrum (level 3 highest level of support) & as a Mental Health Professional to ensure that *all* children are able to access equitable, effective and timely access to early intervention therapy. With the above quote in mind, I want to share my story with you. I believe that stories can be thought of as data with a soul & I want to share my journey down this never ending river & how we can move upstream to keep them from falling in.

Spring of 2010, I obtained my Masters in Social Work & I began my career working at an Early Intervention Autism Day Treatment Program as a Mental Health Professional, serving children ages 18 months to 5 years of age. The opportunity to impact the development of social skills, language, self-regulation and self-efficacy while their brains were learning at a rapid speed was my passion. Within 2 years of starting this role, I made the really difficult decision to leave. This had nothing to do with the kids or families; rather I could barely maintain life outside of work due to salary & increasingly intense caseloads due to lack of staffing. I then spent the next 11 years in a federal setting level 4 elementary building where we saw the number of children needing the highest level of support, as early as kindergarten, increase sharply. . I would estimate  $\frac{3}{4}$  of those families sat on early intervention waitlists, but by the time that their name was at the top, they were 5 or 6 years old. Due to the lack of access and ability to receive early intervention, I deeply believe that it puts a further stress on our education system, which is already crumbling due to increased enrollments and decreased staff to serve student needs in regards to their mental health & autism.

Fast forward to Winter 2020, before Ollie was even 1 year old, I chose to get him on 6 waitlists to receive therapy for early intervention. I knew he was going to need services, support and passionate therapists to help him navigate the world around him, as he was showing signs of Autism since he was about 7 months old. Each waitlist was a MINIMUM of 1 year wait. Some of the programs that I placed him on, were programs I would never have chosen for him or our family in a world that was fully staffed and funded, but put him on every list I could within the radius of our home because something was better than nothing. We spent 18 months on a wait list before we started therapy for Ollie. Each day we waited for that call, was a day that we lost the opportunity to capitalize on his beautifully developing brain to deepen his progress. We were losing time to make an impact; not because we did not know the importance, but because there are systemic barriers that prevented it. We have now been receiving services since October 2021, and my Ollie says my name, can communicate his needs, plays with his twin brother, can follow simple directions and LOVES to be with our family and engage in the world around him. He can indicate when he is sick, hurt, hungry, wants to play, and thrives when he is learning.

I will never be able to express the profound impact our therapy providers have had on my son and our family. They have helped Ollie be Ollie, give our family hope, learn to love him in the way in which he needs and desires. My heart aches that there are thousands of children and families who are unable to receive early intervention due to extreme wait lists, lack of staffing, finances to pay for the intensity of services or education of all the different early intervention models offered to children. We look upstream as the quote implies, that is early intervention, access to services and financial resources to create sustainable programming for those in need.

Bringing about the changes in HF 1604/SF 1765 and HF 1626/SF 1593 would help eliminate some of the barriers that impact timely access to services, increase funding to help retain staff providing such critical services and allow family to choose the service providers they want, rather than “taking what they can get” before it is too late for early intervention. We only have 5 years to make a critical impact on the neurobiology of our littles that need it most. Every day without a provider is a day they lose progress. Early intervention is how we move upstream to prevent them from falling in.

Sincerely,

Linnea Devine, LICSW