



Michigan Elder
Justice Initiative

**Written Testimony
Michigan House of Representatives
Appropriations Committee
September 25, 2024**

I am Alison Hirschel and I am the Director of the Michigan Elder Justice Initiative (MEJI). We work to empower, educate, and protect low income older adults and people with disabilities. One of our major areas of focus is long term care.

Through our legal services and ombudsman programs, we represent and assist hundreds of individuals who need long term supports and services each year. We see up close how the quality of our clients' lives and the quality of their care is negatively impacted by:

- the flaws in our system;
- the shortage of direct care workers; and
- the lack of adequate pay, respect, and support for direct care workers.

The population of older adults is growing in Michigan and across the country. The US Census Bureau estimates that 24% of Michigan's population will be 60 or older by 2030, a 32% increase since 2012. Some of these older adults—people like my 98 year old Mom—are very vulnerable and have seen everything from a world war to a worldwide pandemic. They shouldn't have to struggle to find or go without services to meet their needs now.

Home Help is a foundational program that provides home care for people living in their communities. The people I know who use Home Help depend on their workers to get them out of bed, to eat, to bathe, to work. Home care workers provide critical, compassionate, sometimes heroic work; they are key to the autonomy and independence of the people they support.

I know how important home care is to my clients. In almost 40 years of doing this work, I've virtually never helped a client who wanted to be in a nursing home. That's not surprising because, according to an Associated Press study, only 4 in 100 adults want to end up in a nursing home. My clients, like older adults across the state, just want to get the help they need right where they are—in their own homes and communities.

In the last six weeks, I have been a full-time caregiver for my own mother in her home as she approaches the end of her life. It is the hardest thing I have ever done. It is physically

demanding, emotionally draining, and unpredictable. Responding to my Mom's needs requires compassion, patience, creativity, and endurance. I'm incredibly lucky to have a deep and loving relationship with my Mom and the professional network, family support, and financial resources to ensure she has everything she needs. But I couldn't keep my Mom at home without the help of the paid caregivers who assist her. Their lives are incredibly difficult and their hourly wage from their home care agency is very low. To make ends meet, they work for multiple agencies, cobbling together day and night shifts that often total far more than 40 hours/week. They have no guarantee of full-time work from week to week and no sick time. My mother is a stranger to them. And yet they see this work as their mission and come through for us night after night, making it possible for us to keep my Mom in her own home and to know she is receiving loving care even when we need a break to sleep.

Frustratingly, I can't always get enough caregivers to fill our shifts. Like my family, our clients have an increasingly difficult time finding the care they need in the community.

- Some people can't find any caregivers; some can only patch together a few hours here and there, leaving them without meals, baths, help going to the bathroom, and other essential daily activities for large parts of the day.
- Some have family members and friends who want to help but can't afford to give up jobs that pay better or feel isolated and unprepared and can't handle the enormous challenges of caregiving without more training and support.
- When they can't get the help they need, some of our clients end up in nursing homes, the last place they want to be.
- Others just stay home in situations that are unsafe, undignified, and leave them vulnerable to preventable health crises such as falls, bed sores, and malnourishment.

It's no surprise that our clients can't find enough staff to provide care for them. In Michigan and across the country, there is a critical shortage of home care workers. That is because people who do home care—like the aides who help my Mom—aren't paid enough, don't get paid time off, and often can't afford health insurance. They don't get training and on-going education and support for the challenging work they are expected to do. And our clients can't find staff because there isn't an effective registry to match people who need caregivers with the caregivers who are available, trained and willing to work.

Senate Bills 790 and 791, creating the Home Help Caregiver Council, would strengthen the Home Help program by:

- Helping to build a stable workforce of home care workers who can meet our clients' needs
- Creating a registry so workers and people who need care could find one another;
- Offering training to workers so they can care for people in a way that keeps them safe from falls and injuries;
- Providing infrastructure that would benefit both the workers and the people who use Home Help; and
- Providing centralized information and support in times of health crises like the pandemic or natural disasters.

When this legislation passes, we'll have more justice for home care workers and a lot more home care for older adults and people with disabilities. We need both and we need them now. We wholeheartedly support these bills and ask for your immediate support.

Thank you.