

EXHIBIT 17
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Madame Chair and Members of the Committee:

For the record my name is Colleen Nichols and I am here today speaking on behalf of my son Nathan Nichols and members of People First of Montana.

Our family lives in Helena and have been part of the service delivery system in Montana for the past 25 years. We have seen first hand how the service delivery has evolved from a "slot" system into a the current system that recognizes consumer and family member choice. Nathan is very fortunate to have a cost plan that meets many of his needs and to live in a community where he has options to choose from. Many Montanans with disabilities do not have adequate cost plans to meet their needs and their choices are limited due to that fact. Nathan has lived at home for 25 years and we are anxious to not have the responsibility for his 24 hour care but his current cost plan does not provide adequate funding for that - however we will continue to work with his service providers and other families to develop create options.

Individually and as a spokesperson for People First of Montana there is a great deal of support for the Rate Reimbursement Project, as it will allow individuals with disabilities to know that the rate for specific services will be the same across the state. The development of the MONA and the fact that families and individuals will have more control over their budgets and choice of services is an important step forward. However the following concerns must be addressed:

The rate structure that is being proposed for providers must be fair and not put existing agencies into financial troubles. We urge that those rates be carefully implemented and truly meet the service needs of individuals.

The Montana Needs Assessment (MONA) tool must be fully explained to consumers and their family members and it's implementation must done in a way that does not adversely impact individuals.

Another issue that is of utmost importance to individuals with disabilities is wage parity for direct care staff. In many cases direct care staff are the people who have the most day to day interaction with people with disabilities and their families. We support an increase in wages so that these important people can afford to live in Montana and continue to work with us.

On a personal note, my daughter graduated from Carroll College in May, 2004 and is currently working for a service provider in Helena. Because of her degree her position pays more than direct care staff receive, but unfortunately not enough to prevent her from having to work 2 jobs to make ends meet.

Thanks for your time and support of issues that are important to people with disabilities and their families.

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