

Raise The Wage For All DSPs


I'm not a public speaker — but for this, I'll make an exception. Time and time again, I've heard it from DSPs who testify: They love what they do. They don't want to leave this field or the people they support — but low state and federal funding forces them to consider it.

DSPs are underfunded. The DHS Wage & Rate Study, commissioned by the legislature, revealed a staggering funding gap of \$558 million. So what can we do? Advocate for change.

During this legislative session, hundreds of people testified in person, online, or submitted written testimony urging lawmakers to fully fund Oregon's \$558 million gap for IDD services.


Natasha, our CEO, along with members of leadership and many DSPs, have testified to make our voices heard. But the most powerful voices, by far, have been those on the front lines — DSPs and the people we support.





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Leadership Team



Natasha Atkinson
CEO/ Executive Director

Natasha leads with a heart that values every individual's journey, and believes in the power of...


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Kellie Ward
Director of Human Services

Kellie cultivates our team's strength, mentoring with a...


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Kim Kerby-Mellow
Director of Quality Assurance and Improvement

With over three decades at UHI, Kim is dedicated to...

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Sabrina Murray
Director of Accounting

Sabrina ensures financial integrity and strategic planning, stewarding...

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The photo below shows Jody Lee, a dedicated DSP with UHI who also supports a family member at home. Like thousands of DSPs across Oregon, he chooses this work and deeply feels the impact of low wages caused by underfunding.

At UHI, we're committed to doing everything we can to support DSPs in earning a living wage, so they can focus on the excellent support they provide every day.

If you or someone you know is interested in advocating, please reach out to the UHI office — we'd be happy to help you get connected.



Inspiring Quote

“Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much.”
Helen Keller



Tree of Life

June 2025



Get Your Questions Answered
at UHI's Website: UHI.LIFE

Let’s Roll Tim!

“You can join us,” says Holly, one of UHI’s dedicated DSA (Direct Support Activities) team members. Her role? Taking the people we support out into the community — to build skills, create experiences, and, yes, to have fun.

It might sound easy — paid to have fun — but there’s much more to it. DSA team members carefully learn how to best support each individual. They personalize outings based on the person’s interests, communication style, and preferences.

They also become experts in recognizing non-verbal cues — signs of discomfort, pain, or illness — and knowing when something’s not quite right. On top of that, they document each outing for state reimbursement.



Take Tim, for example. For him, it’s all about getting outdoors and soaking up the sun. When he’s ready for a snack, he gives a gentle motion to his cheek — a subtle but clear communication that Holly understands perfectly.

It was an honor to accompany Holly and see how she tailors support to each person’s unique needs. If you’re interested in becoming part of our DSA team, please reach out to the UHI main office — we’d love to help you get started. Already a DSP? You can incorporate DSA into your role by doing these types of meaningful, skill-building outings with the people you already support.

Gossip Hurts The Team

Let’s Talk About Gossip – It Affects Us All

Gossip is something nearly everyone experiences—at work, in social circles, or even within families. While it may seem harmless, gossip often carries serious consequences. Let’s look at the negative impacts:

- Damages Relationships – Gossip erodes trust and creates conflict between friends, coworkers, and family.
- Harms Reputations – False or exaggerated information can lead to long-term personal and professional damage.
- Creates a Toxic Work Environment – It lowers morale, reduces productivity, and increases turnover.
- Causes Emotional Distress – Being the subject of gossip can lead to stress, anxiety, and feelings of betrayal.

What should we do when we hear gossip start? Stay calm. Speak up. Stop it. Redirect the conversation respectfully and focus on facts, not assumptions. Gossip often thrives on misinformation.

In the workplace, reducing gossip starts with leadership and culture. Promote open communication, encourage respectful dialogue, and create spaces where concerns can be shared honestly. It’s important that team members feel empowered to speak up without fear of judgment or backlash.

After tension caused by gossip, rebuild trust by:

- Organizing team-building activities
- Recognizing positive behavior
- Offering growth opportunities

Fostering a culture of respect, inclusion, and transparency helps create a workplace where people feel heard and valued—and where gossip loses its power.

When we choose kindness, clarity, and connection, we all benefit. Let’s build each other up, not tear each other down.

Every word we speak can either encourage growth or discourage it—so let’s use our voices wisely. A positive, supportive culture starts with each of us choosing to contribute to the solution, not the problem.

Get To Know Shara Alderman

“I’ve been with UHI for about 12 or 13 years now,” says our Director of Residential Operations. “I started as a DSP sub, then moved to Program Manager, and now I’m here. I skipped a few steps along the way!”



Though she applied for roles like Dietary and Med Tech and didn’t get them, she reflects with humor and perspective: “That’s fine—those weren’t the doors meant for me. I believe every step taught me something.”

Stepping into leadership came naturally over time, but the internal work was harder. “The opportunities came easy, the hard part was trusting myself. The hard part is to have the confidence.”

Now, her goals include joining the board for Casa de Belem and continuing to grow at UHI. “Even as a DRO, I want to be available all the time. I want to help Natasha in any way, shape, or form.”

Her advice to anyone hoping to grow with UHI? “Stay loyal. Don’t necessarily follow the money. What you’re doing right now is important. People told me this place wasn’t good, but I didn’t think so. I followed my heart. I absolutely love supporting the people who live in UHI—it’s always been a passion of mine.”

She’s faced her share of tough moments as a DSP. “One time I peed my pants in the community—I had to go so bad, and there were no bathrooms around. I had spare clothes in the car and just handled it. I didn’t tell anyone… well, until now!”

Another vivid memory: “I was supporting someone who hadn’t had a BM in three days. When it finally happened, it was everywhere—I mean everywhere. We had gowns, but it wasn’t enough. It made me stronger though. I’ve been kicked, punched, hugged tight, and covered in just about everything. But what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

And then, there are the special moments: “Wesley used to love my red Spider-Man beanie. One night I came in without it, and he was mad—until he realized it was still me. That bond was so special. Or the time Sanders said, ‘There’s a man on the roof and his butt is hanging out!’ I laughed, looked out the window, and sure enough, there was Patrick from maintenance.”

Now as a Director, the best part is being there for her managers. “I told them once we should have a meeting where we just laugh the whole time. We haven’t done it yet—but we will!” The hardest part? “Not seeing the people we support every day. I miss them—all of them.”

Any regrets? “No. None at all.”

Team Synergy

Seeing the team come together to get refreshed on UHI’s mission and values. At this meeting, we covered what is happening in the legislature regarding DSP funding. We had training from the HIV Alliance on how to use Narcan to save someone from an overdose.

We had a presentation from DCSmokeFree, a bold campaign to help Douglas County end youth vaping, support families, and provide accessible resources for quitting. We were also trained on supporting relationships for the people we support. Thank you all for being part of this Team Synergy; keep up the great work!

