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United for Quality Care

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Before the Appropriations Committee

Good Afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Nicole Bongiovanni, and I live in Madison. In 2004, a friend of mine became sick with cancer, and needed a caregiver. I quit my job to care for her, and even after she passed away I have been a PCA ever since. If you'd told me 20 years I'd find my calling in PCA work, I wouldn't have believed you. But that's truly how I feel: that I am called for this work.

It's a hard job, believe me. I have three consumers, and work 73 hours per week. Two of my consumers are total care, they do not move at all; the third is nonverbal. I have to bathe them, feed them, dress them, toilet them. It takes a lot of energy and takes a toll on me. For my nonverbal consumer, I must find other ways to communicate with her. But they are like family to me. The job is very intimate. My consumers are vulnerable but don't want to lose their integrity, so I must care for them with love, respect, and mutual trust. They deserve to have their personhood respected, and it's my calling to help them do that.

Since becoming a PCA in 2004 I've rarely been sick and have never had health insurance. I make too much to qualify for Husky, but I can't afford to purchase it on the exchange: last time I priced it out, it would be \$700/month, which is almost as much as my rent. We also don't have any paid time off. All of this means, I can't afford to get sick.

One day last June, I was at work when I began to have a hard time breathing. I thought maybe I had contracted COVID. I was taken to the hospital in an ambulance, where I was diagnosed with a minor heart attack. I stayed in the hospital 3 days and I lost 5 days of pay. I should have taken off longer, but I couldn't afford it so I went back to work almost immediately. Today, I have a \$23,000 bill that I can't pay. That's half of my annual salary.

Last Monday, I went to work and one of my consumers was not feeling well; she later tested positive for COVID. The next day I went to get tested and discovered I have COVID, too. I will be out of work for 14 days, and I am worried if I end up needing to go back to the hospital for COVID, how much will I owe then?

Please hear our stories. I am not the only one facing this impossible situation. We need affordable health care; we need paid sick days; and we need retirement. I am 65 years old, I've been in the workforce for over 40 years, but I don't know how or if I'll be able to retire. That's not fair, and that's not right. We care for the most vulnerable; and all we're asking for is to be able to care for ourselves, too. Thank you for your time.