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April 26, 2023

Chair Hoffman, Chair Noor, and Members of the Human Services Conference Committee:

As Social Services Director in Dakota County, I am writing to express my full support for the Governor's proposal in the House omnibus bill that phases-out the outdated and discriminatory practice of paying employees with disability less than minimum wage in Minnesota.

First, and most importantly, ending subminimum wage is the right thing to do. The practice is rooted in historical assumptions that people with disabilities can't work and earn real wages. These beliefs devalue the contributions of people with disabilities and have been disproven over and over. Dakota County has a long history of supporting people with disabilities to find jobs and careers that leverage their strengths, interests, and contributions.

We have invested in training for case managers on employment and informed choice; developed internal capacity to support transition-age youth in exploring career opportunities; established partnerships with employment services providers, employers, and state agencies to align employment efforts; and adopted our own Employment First policy to reflect a belief that all people can work and earn competitive wages. We are committed to increasing wages and economic opportunity for people with disabilities not only because it can be a ladder out of poverty, but also because it is what people tell us they want.

And while supporting these provisions is the right thing to do, it is also a practical matter. There is growing momentum nationwide to phase out subminimum wage federally. Minnesota – once a leader in employment for people with disabilities – has fallen behind. We need state investment, planning, and coordination to build capacity in our home and community-based services system to better support competitive employment. These provisions would support that transition while finally ending sub-minimum wage in Minnesota.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Evan Henspeter", written over a horizontal line.

Evan Henspeter
Director of Social Services, Dakota County

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