

## **Becky Aungst, President & CEO, Skills of Central PA**

### **Testimony Regarding Potential Impacts of COVID-19 Vaccine Mandate for Employers**

#### **About Skills of Central Pennsylvania**

- Skills is a non-profit health and human services organization that provides support for people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities and those recovering from mental health challenges.
- Skills is one of the largest human service providers in central Pennsylvania, offering services in 17 counties throughout the region and employing approximately 1,000 people in a variety of professional, clinical, and direct support roles.
- Like many other health and human service providers, our operations have been severely impacted by the ongoing hiring crisis.
- We are deeply concerned that the hiring crisis will be made even worse if a COVID-19 vaccine mandate is implemented for employers like Skills.

#### **Potential Impacts of a Vaccine Mandate on Our Workforce**

- It is important to understand that we view the subject of COVID-19 vaccine mandates through the lens of an industry whose workforce is already seriously destabilized.
  - Our vacancy rate has grown from 14% in 2019 to 29% today.
  - Our turnover rate has grown from 31.4% in 2019 to 61.6% today.
  - Employees are leaving for better work-life balance and higher pay.
    - We pay new direct support staff an average of \$13.52/hour for a job that requires them to help people go to the bathroom, shower, take medications, and give tube feedings. Local convenience stores are offering a higher starting wage. We simply can't compete with other businesses based on pay since our reimbursement rates are so low.
- If vaccines are mandated, some portion of our staff will undoubtedly resign. Given the current staffing crisis, we cannot afford to lose a single staff member.
- Even if employees are given the option to forego vaccination provided they undergo weekly testing, we expect that some employees will grow weary of repeated testing and resign. Again, we cannot afford to lose a single staff member.
- Many job applicants are asking about our policy on whether or not we mandate vaccines. When they hear that we hope to provide a choice, they respond positively.
- For the convenience of staff, and to minimize lost work time due to testing, we are hoping to offer testing on site. We estimate the cost of this unfunded mandate to be approximately \$10,000 per week.

#### **Potential Impacts to the People We support**

- The people we support often think of our staff as family. Unfortunately, many of those "family members" are leaving for higher-paying jobs, and more may leave if vaccinations or testing become mandatory. The resulting discontinuity in staffing is detrimental to the people we support.

- We operate eighty-eight group homes throughout central Pennsylvania. We have already consolidated several of our group homes, so we can maintain an appropriate staffing level. These disruptions are already impacting the concept of having an “everyday life.”
  - If the staffing crisis gets worse as a result of the vaccination mandate, our ability to properly support people will be in jeopardy.
    - What is the alternative? Will people be forced to move from their community homes back to state institutions?
- In addition, we also operate several day programs, employment services programs, and vocational training programs throughout central Pennsylvania. As part of these programs, we take people who participate in them out in the community. Our short-staffing situation is already making it difficult to do so. If staff leave due to a vaccination mandate, these challenges will grow even worse.