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December 16, 2021

Dear Friends and Supporters of PAO,

Gratitude. During this season of gratitude, I've been reflecting on the many blessings that have come into my life since being a part of Personal Assistance Options. Over the years, I've learned that our relationships with others are the greatest determinant of our happiness. In fact, throughout history and around the world, religious leaders and philosophers have extolled the virtue of gratitude. Some have even described gratitude as the "social glue" that fortifies relationships – between friends, family, and community members – and serves as the backbone of human society. Research suggests that gratitude inspires people to be more generous, kind, and helpful and may improve climate in the workplace.

Many studies have examined the connection between gratitude and various elements of psychological well-being. In general, more grateful people are happier, more satisfied with their lives, less materialistic, and less likely to suffer from burnout. Gratitude may also benefit people with various medical and psychological challenges. For example, one study found that more grateful cardiac patients reported better sleep, less fatigue, and lower levels of cellular inflammation. And there are several studies that have found that more grateful people experience less depression and are more resilient following traumatic events. Indeed, gratitude may live up to its reputation as "the mother of all virtues" by encouraging the development of other virtues like patience, humility, and wisdom.

For me, the blessings include being grateful for the opportunity and privilege to serve as the Executive Director of this outstanding nonprofit. I appreciate my knowledgeable, dedicated, and selfless office staff that strive for better efficiencies in how we deliver our services. I give thanks for the determined and compassionate support staff who choose to be employed by PAO and who help and assist those with disabilities achieve their dreams and goals in life.

And I am grateful for you, our passionate support system. Over my 15-year tenure, our agency has weathered many storms. Throughout these most recent difficult times, you reached out online, by phone and email to offer encouragement. You made financial gifts to lift up those in need, and you have shown up — in person and virtually — to support our efforts in the communities where we serve. My relationship with you means the world to me and is the "glue" that keeps us moving forward in our purpose and mission to provide services that shape lives for the better.

State News. It's no secret that providers across the state continue to be frustrated with the staffing shortage crisis that's been in place even before COVID, although the pandemic has increased the problem ten-fold. Providers share stories of the lack of applicants; or how, once someone applies for a job, they never show up for their scheduled interview. Or the people who are actually hired, don't come for their scheduled initial orientation. This puts current support staff in overtime with the potential for burnout. 2021 has proven itself to be an especially challenging year when it comes to hiring support staff to assure those we serve are safe and healthy. There is some good news, though. Below is part of a recent press release -



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“Gov. Whitmer Announces \$2.5 Million Awarded to Business Groups to Address Labor Shortages

LANSING, Mich. – Governor Gretchen Whitmer and the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO) awarded a total of \$2.5 million in Michigan Industry Cluster Approach 3.0 (MICA 3.0) grants to business groups across the state to address labor shortages.

“These grants are putting Michiganders first by helping innovative employers in high-demand industries address talent shortages across Michigan,” said Governor Gretchen Whitmer. “Together, we can continue leading the future of agriculture, construction, IT, manufacturing, mobility, and so much more as we usher in a new era of prosperity for our families, communities, and small businesses.”

I’m pleased to announce that PAO is one of three providers in the state that was asked to be an employer champion to address the direct care workforce shortage. Specifically, IMPART Alliance (which is a coalition of researchers, direct support staff, consumers and, agencies working together to develop a competent direct care workforce, improve the lives of support staff and the individuals they serve, and be a model for the nation – of which coalition PAO is a part) received a MICA grant for \$249,914. The project period starts immediately and runs until April 30th, 2024.

The following are examples of goals that our Collaborative focused on the Direct Care Worker (DCW) shortage may have:

- Activities that promote recruitment, placement, training, and retention of Direct Care Workers.
- Working with relevant partners to set competency standards.
- Re-design of educational programs to map to these standards and to directly respond to the industry-identified demand and universal curriculum needed to address occupational skill requirements.
- Locating or developing curriculum when relevant training programs are not available.
- Developing credentialing systems and career pathways.

Much work and advocacy still need to be done and this is a great way to help us, help legislators understand the value of the Direct Care Worker role within the health care industry. Our advocacy work has already proven itself with what we believe were our efforts to increase wages from the state. This includes the \$2.35/hour wage increase effective October 1, 2021. I’ll keep you posted on our efforts over the grant cycle.

PAO News. COVID Update. We continue to be very fortunate that COVID-19 and the Delta variant hasn’t had a huge impact for us as an agency. Since my last newsletter in July, we’ve had 6 employees test positive; two in Midland who had symptoms and four in Bay County who were all asymptomatic. Employees who work in Isabella County didn’t have anyone test positive. For those we serve, none tested positive in Midland or Isabella counties, however two tested positive in Bay County; one who was asymptomatic and the other needed to be hospitalized. With much sadness, I share with you the person we served who needed hospitalization passed away. Although he was fully vaccinated, he had several medical issues which meant a compromised immune system that wasn’t able to fight off the virus. We have wonderful memories of him and feel truly blessed to have been a part of his life.



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As a business in the healthcare field, we continue to wear masks when supporting someone indoors and provide education regarding the vaccine. That hasn't changed since the beginning of the pandemic. On November 5, 2021, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration ("OSHA") unveiled its emergency temporary standard ("ETS") requiring employers with 100 or more employees to mandate vaccination against COVID-19 or weekly testing. This would include PAO as, currently, we have close to 130 employees in all three counties (Bay, Midland, & Isabella). Since then, the ETS has been met by a tidal wave of legal challenges nationwide. On November 12, 2021, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit granted a motion to stay (i.e., to halt) enforcement of the ETS "until further court order." This order effectively blocks the ETS from going into effect across the nation while the pending lawsuits are being litigated.

In response to the Fifth Circuit's order, OSHA announced that, "while it remains confident in its authority to protect workers in emergencies," it was suspending all "activities related to implementation and enforcement of the ETS pending future developments in the litigation".

The cases challenging OSHA's ETS will now move to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit (the Circuit covering Michigan, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee). The Sixth Circuit was selected at random to litigate these cases as part of the federal court system's process for consolidating nationwide cases involving similar issues. The Sixth Circuit now has the authority to reaffirm, lift, or amend the Fifth Circuit's stay order. A majority of the Sixth Circuit's judges were appointed by Republican Presidents.

No one knows how long OSHA's ETS will remain halted. A decision from the Sixth Circuit could take months. Similarly, a subsequent appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court could extend the wait even longer. Given the appeal and OSHA's decision to suspend any enforcement of the ETS, it would seem OSHA's original compliance dates of December 5, 2021, and January 4, 2022, are no longer viable. As such, employers wishing to adopt a "wait and see" approach to compliance may take some comfort in knowing they will most likely have more time. That said, it will take time to plan and prepare for compliance if a court determines the ETS is legal and lifts the stay. Since that could happen at any time, PAO is seeking the most prudent path and we're preparing for the ETS as if it may be going into effect imminently.

Annual Fundraiser. After waiting over a year and a half, 'celebrities' and artists came together on Thursday, September 30th at the Midland Holiday Inn Conference room for our 14th Annual Celebrity Art Gala. The two teams in a friendly competition to see who could raise the most funds for PAO were Isabella Bank and Dow Chemical Employees' Credit Union. Each 'celebrity' was paired with a local artist and together, they created some amazing art pieces that were auctioned off by a professional auctioneer. The innovation of ideas and the use of materials when creating one-of-a-kind art pieces shows the artist's high level of skill that comes with years of experience, and I'm so thankful they were able to share their natural talents and gifts with those in attendance. Silent auction items such as a hot air balloon ride for two, a suite at the Dow Diamond, an indoor/outdoor fireplace, and a helicopter tour for two were just a few of the many items available to purchase. I'm especially pleased that we raised over \$36,000, which is the most we've ever done. Our Board of Directors will take the next few months and come up with a strategy for how this money will be used in the services we deliver. I'll update you on our progress in my next newsletter.

PAO Mission: Providing support to individuals with differing abilities based on their personal needs and goals.



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Final Thoughts. I've never been a big New Year's resolution person. I don't have any specific goal in mind for 2022 (although I guess I still have a couple more weeks to think of one). But what I do hope is that next year is a lot more settled than this one.

Even after this pandemic ends, it's clear that much of the digitization it brought on is here to stay. The last two years have led to monumental leaps forward in how we use technology, accelerating changes that would've otherwise taken years—if not a decade or longer. We've seen rapid, widespread adoption of services that already existed, like telehealth, ordering groceries online, or having meetings over video chat. And we've seen the creation of new innovations that I think only represent the tip of the iceberg of what's to come in the years ahead.

Collaboration has been a constant theme of my work this year, whether it's being a part of a group of local leaders who are working on a master plan for equity for those with special needs in our community, or being involved with IMPART Alliance and working with people across the state to bring value to the position of Direct Support Staff within Michigan and the nation. I genuinely believe that change happens because groups of people get together and decide to make things better. It might not happen as quickly as you want or need, but if you have enough smart, thoughtful, and passionate people pushing for it, progress will eventually come.

On behalf of our Board of Directors and those of us in the office, I wish you a peaceful holiday season filled with good health and joyous memories.

Best Regards,



Kathleen S. Allen
Executive Director
Personal Assistance Options