

May 7, 2021

Co-chairs Girod and Holvey and esteemed committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in favor of funding to support our Empowerment Center project.

For almost 50 years, **lifempowered** (formerly known as Riverside Training Centers, Inc) has been providing innovative supports to adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) in Columbia County. In that time, we have prided ourselves on being forward thinking, mission driven and committed to those most vulnerable citizens from our community.

From the time we started; founded by a handful of parents in a basement of a church, who wanted more for their children, we have worked diligently to operate utilizing best practices not only in the services we provide but also as responsible stewards of public resources. We have been growing and innovating, working to fulfill our mission of supporting the people we serve to lead the lives *they* choose.

Over these last decades we have grown and evolved, moving from facility based (warehouse) settings, large group living settings (up to 10 people in one home), to a focus on small settings, supporting people in their own homes, and providing only community based services that are directed by the people who choose us. A key part of our success is our Direct Support Professional (DSP) workforce. For us to continue to meet our mission and see our vision come to pass, a strong, healthy, skilled workforce is critical, as is being a valued and contributing part of our community. To date, the only part of **lifempowered** that hasn't moved forward with our mission is our primary administrative worksite.

The building from which we operate is an antiquated and failing metal pole barn style structure that has been "updated" by adding on sections over the last 40 years to try and accommodate our ever growing and changing business. It is no longer an optimally functioning structure and sadly, is not even ADA compliant which means it is not fully accessible to the very people with IDD that we support.

As part of a 5 year strategic planning process, we worked with a consulting company to look at where we are currently, where we want to be in 5 years and into the future. It was this process, which included the people we support, DSP's, members of management and administration, as well as our Board of Directors that led us to this funding request.

We looked at our mission, vision, values and priorities and updated them. We determined that in order to meet our mission, we needed to focus on empowering and supporting the personal and professional development of our workforce. A skilled, healthy workforce means that those essential caring workers who interact day in and day out, providing supports to the people with IDD that we serve means better quality supports, and as such, better quality of life – the life *they* choose.

It was this process that indicated it may be time to look at how we best care for the people we support and concurrently our employees, by that focus on education internally as well as for the community at large. Part of creating an opportunity for education includes a space to do so. As noted, our current building (which we have been operating from for more than 40 years) is woefully underwhelming. It is not secure, not disaster proof, not ADA compliant and chopped into many inefficient segments. At present, we cannot hold staff meetings in our own building and have to look elsewhere. Locations that can accommodate our workforce of almost 100 are scarce in our community.

It was determined that it was more cost effective to start over than to try to upgrade the existing structure – if that were even possible. To that end, we engaged in a rebranding effort (i.e.: RTC to **lifempowered**), a community market study – which proved positive – and finally a feasibility study to determine if building an *Empowerment Center* was realistic. It turns out it is! Our community strongly supports the effort and we have been able to quantify giving from the City of St Helens, private foundations, community partners and ideally lottery funds* of 86% of the total cost of new construction. We have also obtained approval to buy the land from the Port of Columbia County, which means control of the land is no longer an issue. We are in final negotiations regarding the price.

In addition to meeting our mission, this Empowerment Center complements our values and priorities in that it enables us to be a resource for the larger community by offering a tech savvy community meeting space, a learning kitchen, restrooms and showers, a small workout space, a meditation/sensory room, and office spaces that are all more than ADA compliant, they would be 100% accessible to anyone, regardless of level of ability. An example of what we envision are cupboards in the learning kitchen that are hydraulic so that a person who uses a wheelchair could simply push a button and have the cupboard lower itself to within their reach. There is amazing and inclusive technology we plan to fully incorporate that supports the learning and skill building of not only the people we support, but all persons with or without disabilities. Furthermore, as part of **lifempowered**'s emergency preparedness plan, a safe site to which we can evacuate in the event one or more of our homes are uninhabitable, is required. We currently have to coordinate with local hotels for that service – the Empowerment Center will be designed to meet that requirement. We are in discussion with the Columbia County Commissioners and Emergency Management Department to see how we may partner to provide overflow emergency/evacuation supports for the county. The development of our Empowerment Center will not only support our mission, but the community at large.

Of course, our mission and the people we support are our first priority – and we feel that the proposed Empowerment Center meets that goal.

Thank you for your consideration of our request for lottery funds. We understand that resources are limited and you have a tremendous responsibility to use them wisely. We believe that investing in this project is an excellent opportunity for Oregon to put their money toward a project that supports people, generates jobs, builds skills, and provides a safe shelter. It will also create a destination for people in and outside of our community who need meeting space – which drives revenue to local businesses. It is a win-win.

Respectfully,

Cindy Stockton

Executive Director