

New York State Dispute Resolution Association
Testimony at the Joint Legislative Public Hearing
Public Protection
January 31, 2017

Speakers:

Charlotte Carter, Executive Director, NYSDRA

Sarah Rudgers-Tysz, Executive Director, Mediation Matters (serving Albany, Rensselaer, Saratoga, Schenectady, Warren and Washington counties.

(Introductions)

Charlotte Carter:

NYSDRA is professional association of public and private mediators. We also administer statewide mediation and arbitration programs under contracts with state agencies. We are part of a network of CDRCs who provide services at little to no cost to residents in every county in New York. Currently there are 20 CDRCs who help people resolve conflict through a wide range of services.

We are here to ask the Legislature for \$1.7 million to fund a Family Services Initiative that will allow the CDRCs to meet the serious needs of families across NY State. We are all aware that there are more complicated challenges faced by youth, families and the systems supporting them. Many of those problems cannot be adequately addressed in traditional forums. The CDRCs could meet these needs but lack adequate resources to do so.

In 1981 the New York Legislature passed legislation to establish the CDRC network, with funding and oversight provided by Office of Court Administration. That funding grew from an initial \$529,000 for 17 counties to a little over \$9 million in 2010.

In 2011, that funding was slashed by 44%, and has not increased significantly since then. Current State funding to CDRCs is only \$5.4 million, which has forced CDRCs to focus on their core, court-based services and limit their service to the broader community. We continue to have positive discussions with OCA, but we do not have information on a timeline for restoration of OCA funding. In the meantime, the CDRCs are facing a staggering need for family services that goes well beyond the court-based work that OCA funds. The support of the Legislature would allow the network to deliver innovative family

services to veterans and the military, young people and schools, elder adults and their caregivers, and people leaving the corrections system.

To illustrate the benefits and effectiveness of CDRC services, here are a few statistics. Mediation provides low cost, high yield conflict management: a mediated case costs the State just \$336, and 75% result in agreements. Disputes are resolved within a few weeks, and 92% of participants are satisfied. We all benefit from the restoration of important personal and business relationships.

Last year the network served nearly 70,000 individuals and handled over 28,000 cases. CDRCs match state funding nearly dollar for dollar. They use professionally trained community volunteers, with donated time valued at \$2.3 million annually.

Sarah Rudgers-Tysz:

Demand for this work continues to grow, as do the costs of providing services. We are receiving increasing requests from county offices, partner nonprofits, and schools all seeking our assistance with families in unique situations, such as a parent returning home from military service. Or grandparents who have been the only stable adults in their grandchildren's lives fighting to preserve that connection when the parent is released from prison. Or that same parent, trying to reconnect with their children while also reestablishing themselves in the community. Or a family seeing their teenager struggle with online bullying, where the school has little ability to intervene. Or siblings disagreeing over the care for an aging parent which puts their relationship in jeopardy. These are just a few examples of where our services can transform the lives of families within our communities. Those needs are growing, and with only a small staff spread throughout the six counties we serve, we know that we cannot meet all the requests. This situation is not limited to our area - all across the state, the CDRCs have vast skills and talents to help those struggling within our community but can only spread those resources so far.

Through our dedicated partnerships, we can provide seamless transitions for families in crisis so they do not have to add another step when seeking assistance. Conflict resolution services make our communities safer, and they help individuals feel empowered to resolve the issues in their lives and repair relationships.

We have been meeting with legislators in district and here in Albany, and have had a great response on the ground. By supporting the Family Services Initiative, the Legislature will make a positive difference for vulnerable families and a strong investment in this vital community resource. Thank you.

Community Dispute Resolution Centers (CDRCs) FY 2017-18 Budget Request

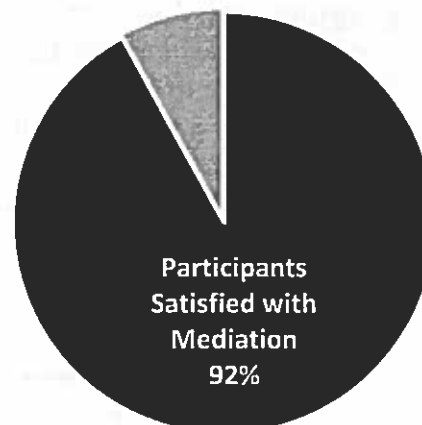
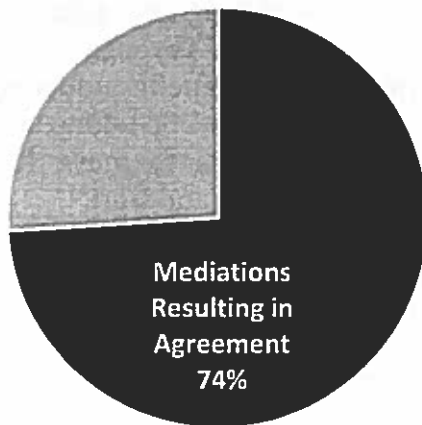


THE REQUEST

The CDRCs are requesting \$1.7 million in the 2017-18 State Budget to fund a Family Services Initiative at all 20 CDRCs statewide. About 80% of the funds will pay for direct services through 28 FTE positions that will respond to the rising demands of New York families. The remaining 20% will cover supervision, space, travel, and other administrative costs.

BACKGROUND

New York's CDRCs have provided mediation, facilitation, conciliation, and arbitration services at no or low cost to participants since 1981, improving access to justice and giving people tools to address conflict peacefully and productively. The New York State Office of Court Administration (OCA) is funding the CDRCs at \$5.4 million in FY 2016-17, with a similar amount expected in FY 2017-18. Despite the State's 44% cut to CDRC funding in 2011, the CDRC network matches their OCA funding nearly dollar for dollar. CDRCs also use professionally trained volunteers to mediate the vast majority of their cases, with donated time valued at an additional \$2.3 million annually. Mediation produces high quality and durable results because participants craft the terms of their own agreements.

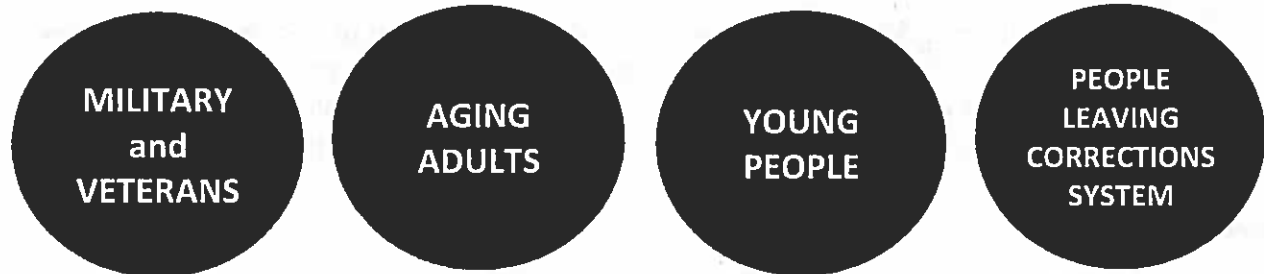


THE NEED

Families across the State are facing increasingly complex issues that cannot be adequately addressed through existing services. While OCA funding helps support court-referred CDRC cases as a cost-effective and time-efficient alternative to the courts, the CDRCs need additional resources to assist families experiencing challenges far beyond standard parenting plans. Families present in true crisis as they face multiple complications, including mental health diagnoses and treatment, healing from past trauma, unplanned pregnancies, drug and alcohol use, generational poverty, and incarceration. CDRCs upstate and downstate - in rural, urban, and suburban settings - see this firsthand with their clients and also through the countless community partners that come to CDRCs for help.

PROGRAM OPPORTUNITIES

CDRCs work effectively with families because their approach focuses on customizing services to respond to their individual needs. CDRCs are uniquely positioned to help because they have developed collaborative relationships with schools, probation, local departments of social services, courts, and community organizations. CDRCs work with these partners to build programs that meet the distinct needs of:



Communication Skills: Although it is typically a specific dispute that brings people to mediation, it is the communication between participants where the most work is often needed. Mediation is successful because it provides a process through which people can express themselves and be heard so that they, in turn, can hear and acknowledge the other participants. The clarity and understanding that result are catalysts for positive and meaningful change in individuals' lives and in their relationships. CDRCs also support family members through one-on-one conflict coaching and communication training.

Supportive Environments: A key avenue for reaching families is through the schools. More and more, schools are recognizing the limits of punitive discipline. Through restorative initiatives, CDRCs are able to introduce an alternative approach that benefits students, staff, and the school culture as a whole. Students can be held accountable while taking an active role in addressing their actions and identifying the steps needed to move forward. Additionally, CDRCs can provide customized training to both students and staff.

By funding skilled and knowledgeable CDRC staff, the Legislature will make a positive difference for vulnerable families and a strong investment in this vital community resource.

For more information, please contact:
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NYS DRA is a nonprofit membership organization that administers dispute resolution programs in partnership with state agencies and CDRCs.