

The Summit Center Testimony on NYS BUDGET
02/08/17

We respectfully submit the following testimony in response to the 2017-18 NYS budget. We seek the support of our elected representatives in the NYS Legislature to work with us to stabilize funding and prevent further erosion of supports and services to individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities I/DD and their families. New York State has been a leader in serving people with I/DD through Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, NYS Department of Health, NYS Office of Mental Health, and Medicaid. Governor Cuomo campaigned with the promise to “ensure that critical programs receive adequate funding to protect vulnerable children and families.” Recent actions have been inconsistent with that promise, and this testimony is intended to illustrate that, before services are discontinued.

Summit programs serve individuals with complex diagnoses that may include moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, along with autism, seizure disorder, or other neurological disorders which impacts communication and learning. It is not uncommon for individuals with severe cognitive delays and difficulty communicating, to exhibit behavioral challenges. Our after school and respite programs provide structured, recreational respite for some of the most behaviorally challenged children in our community. Parent satisfaction data reflects extraordinarily high levels of satisfaction with the program and direct care staff, yet the waitlists for this critically needed service grows each year.

We have the following specific areas of concern:

Invest in Special Education for Better Outcomes

The number of children qualifying for special education and early intervention services continues to increase, without any increase in funding. Over the past few years, School districts have been given a 31% increase for teacher pay while the Budget only provides a 12% increase to our 853 school-age programs and a 4% increase to our 4410 preschools. The difference between what teachers are paid in school districts and what our schools are able to pay, after years of zero tuition growth, continues to widen. Many 4410 and 853 schools have curtailed their services, some have closed. Research tells us that the investment in early childhood development yields great outcomes. Effective early intervention and special education services ensure that children are better prepared to enter school and need fewer services. We need to keep these schools open with dedicated teachers, and funding to enable 4410 and 853 schools to break even and remain open.

Acuity in funding is needed for diverse needs

NYS has instituted regional rates to address funding for services, which does not take into account the unique needs of people with significant behavior challenges, and requiring more intensive levels of support. While there are occasional opportunities for a small number of people to receive services once they are in crisis, the lack of an organized and funded strategy to prevent crisis is simply not in

place. The Summit Center works collaboratively with NY START, Kennedy Krieger Institute, local psychologists and psychiatrists but strongly believes that a more cost effective method of *proactively* providing clinical services would prevent crisis. The outcome would be to reduce costly hospitalizations, reduce the need for families to seek supports at out of state treatment programs, and provide supports to help families learn to address and re-direct behaviors before they escalate and become dangerous. In the absence of meaningful residential development, we must do all that can be done to support families to meet the needs of their adult children in their home.

Models to serve individuals with intensive behaviors are limited and inappropriate

With the closing of sheltered work centers, people with significant physical disabilities and those with significant behavior challenges are faced with fewer adult service options, many which are not appropriate to meet their needs. Programs continue to be challenged to provide services in community settings with reduced capital budgets. The result is often unsafe and or inappropriate settings, particularly for individuals with intense or explosive behavior, for individuals with allergy, individuals who wander, bolt, have PICA, and for individuals with motor challenges that require hands on support in community settings. It is important to note that the majority of the people we serve are moderately to significantly intellectually delayed, most are non-verbal and require 1 to 1 supervision for safety, or a greater level of support to address challenging behavior. Few will ever live independently, and few will work without significant ongoing support. We need an appropriate path forward for these individuals to have a productive, quality life.

Funding is needed for a critically needed workforce

We recognize that without sufficient funding, our workforce will continue to erode. We currently are experiencing a reduction in our OPWDD workforce, the majority are employed through our educational programs. This workforce has the training, experience and behavior skills needed to provide direct care to the most behaviorally challenged individuals, often in the home or in community settings. As an organization, we support the Direct Support Professional Alliance of NYS and the Self Advocates Association of NYS with the #bFair2DirectCare Coalition. Without additional funding to increase the salaries of direct support professionals, we are concerned that our workers will seek other higher paying minimum wage jobs in fast food, hospitality or retail rather than providing critically needed family support services, like respite. Personnel costs, direct support staff costs represent more than 80% of our budgets for OPWDD services. If we can't attract and retain qualified workers we are forced to discontinue providing these services. This will have a dire impact on individuals and families who need this support the most.

Conclusion

We need NYS to work with us to identify new solutions for meeting the growing need for services, invest in jobs so direct service providers can earn a living wage which will stabilize our workforce, and reduce expensive and painful crisis situations for people with intensive behavior needs.

We ask for your support, so individuals with complex needs are provided the supports and services that they need and deserve. Thank you for your support.