



Office for People With Developmental Disabilities

Joint Legislative Budget Hearing Testimony New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities

State Fiscal Year 2023 Executive Budget Proposal February 14, 2022

Good morning, Chairs Krueger and Weinstein, Disability Committee Chairs Mannion and Abinanti, and other distinguished members of the Legislature. I am Kerri Neifeld, Commissioner of the New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony about Governor Hochul's Fiscal Year 2023 Executive Budget and how it benefits New Yorkers served by OPWDD.

I would like to start by saying that this Budget shows the Governor's extraordinary commitment to people with developmental disabilities. This is the first time in recent memory that a Governor has acknowledged our service system within the State of the State address, and Governor Hochul has backed up that acknowledgement with a 12% funding increase for the OPWDD system in her proposed Budget. At OPWDD, we applaud this Budget as a welcome and refreshing demonstration of our State's commitment to the over 100,000 people with developmental disabilities that our service system supports. The Executive Budget is an acknowledgement of how vital people with developmental disabilities are to our communities and our state.

Last fall, when the Governor first spoke with me about becoming Commissioner of OPWDD, she told me that she wanted to see our state once again lead the nation in supports for people with developmental disabilities. If actions do indeed speak louder than words, then the Governor has delivered with a Budget that is fair, balanced and provides approximately \$1.2 billion in new investments for OPWDD to pursue the changes and advancements that our stakeholders have told us are important to them. The funding for our service system is targeted at critical system improvements that will make a difference, ones that will allow OPWDD to build on what works and push further towards the goals our stakeholders envision for our future – more people prepared for and supported to work, more people living with greater independence supported by the right level of community-based services, more people better supported when crisis strikes, and more people able to receive the supports and services they need when they need them, provided by a well-respected and better paid workforce. The 2023 Executive Budget contains this support and more.

Specifically, this proposed Budget provides long overdue and necessary support for one of the most pressing challenges of our time – the shortage of direct support professionals to deliver the care and services New Yorkers need. As the COVID-19

pandemic has continued to impact every sector, the workforce shortage in the developmental disabilities service system has become a crisis, requiring difficult measures to ensure the people we support are safe. This has impacted our ability to provide quality services in every part of the state. It has confounded our non-profit partners as well as our State-operated programs. People's lives have been and continue to be impacted. The Governor's Budget boldly acknowledges the severity of this crisis and the urgent need to act and turn the tide. It commits over \$780 million to support several actions that will improve the ability of the State and non-profit sectors to recruit and retain essential direct care and clinical workers.

These actions include a 5.4 percent cost-of-living adjustment to increase reimbursement levels of non-profit providers, recruitment and retention bonuses to staff of up to \$3,000 each and funding to provide minimum wage increases for staff in the non-profit sector. This support, along with the funds we will receive through the American Rescue Plan Act and devote to workforce initiatives, will begin to correct the course in how we value and support our frontline workers.

But beyond these critical investments in our workforce, the proposed Budget provides long overdue funding to increase the housing subsidy used by people who want to live with greater independence in their own homes and apartments, as well as funding to restore room and board reimbursement levels to residential providers, and \$15 million in new capital funding to expand availability of affordable housing opportunities.

The proposed Budget also supports OPWDD to improve how we assess the needs of children with developmental disabilities, allowing us to recognize and understand their unique need for services. And the Budget funds OPWDD to upgrade and improve our information technology platforms. This, in turn, will improve our data collection and reporting in support of more efficient and informed operations.

There is great excitement within our service system at the opportunity that this Budget provides us. We look forward to an enacted Budget which will allow us to advance OPWDD's supports and services to provide a better life for people with developmental disabilities and the dedicated and talented staff who support them.

I look forward to working with all of you as we make these critical system improvements a reality.