

NYS Joint Budget Hearing on Mental Hygiene 2/14/22  
YAI Testimony

My name is George Contos and I am the CEO of YAI. YAI has been dedicated to providing innovative services for the intellectual and/or developmental disability (I/DD) community since its founding in 1957 at a time when institutional living was the norm for people with I/DD. Today, YAI has a team of more than 4,000 employees and supports more 20,000 people in the I/DD community. I'm testifying on behalf of those 4,000 employees and over 20,000 people we support, to help you understand that New Yorkers who support people with I/DD need your help.

Our staff are struggling. YAI, like every other I/DD agency, is facing a workforce crisis. According to a survey conducted by New York Disability Advocates in 2021, 25% of I/DD provider positions are vacant. More than 90% of agencies show a decrease in job applicants and nearly 40% report being unable to open programs due to staff shortages. Meanwhile, direct support professional (DSP) wages have remained flat for years. Decades of cuts to the New York State Office of People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) and through New York State Medicaid mean that providers have to further tighten their belts after an already difficult budget year due to COVID.

This crisis is acutely felt among current staff. More than 70% of senior staff report covering multiple shifts a day, working overtime to guarantee the people we support receive the high-quality care they deserve. When not covering shifts, staff work overtime so they can afford to pay their bills, struggling to make do with low wages in one of the highest cost-of-living states in the country. The people we support suffer for this too - when we don't have enough staff, we cannot accommodate visits to the community because we have no staff available to guide them. What may have been acceptable during a healthcare crisis should not continue because of a labor problem that the legislature must solve.

The workforce crisis did not spontaneously appear one day; it is the logical outcome of years of decision-making at the highest levels of power. Many years ago, working as a DSP meant earning well above minimum wage, and feeling respected by a government that acknowledged your hard work. The previous administration did not uphold this standard, and instead budget after budget included cuts to Medicaid and OPWDD, or cost of living adjustments so small they did not reach above 1%.

With the new administration and united legislature, you have the opportunity to right the wrongs of the last decade. Already promising is the 5.4% COLA increase the Governor's executive budget included for OPWDD services - likewise, we are happy to see an additional incentive payment for some of our staff.

These are small steps to the true goal, which is achieving the rates set out by the Fair Pay for Home Care legislation. Fair Pay for Home Care would require reimbursement rates that support home care wages at 150% of minimum wage, or \$22.50 in New York City. I do not have to tell you about the legislation of course, as a near supermajority in both chambers cosponsors it.

I urge the legislature to move forward and secure Fair Pay For Home Care in the final budget. With overwhelming support in both chambers, and in negotiation with a budget that has higher than expected revenues, it is a popular measure that can revolutionize New York's system of I/DD support. Our staff gave tirelessly throughout the pandemic, often risking their own safety so they could provide the best quality service to the people we support. They have been doing this standard of work for as long as we have been in operation. It is high time New York recognize this and treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve.