



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

**State Fiscal Year 2027 Executive Budget Proposal
February 4, 2026**

Good morning, Chairs Krueger and Pretlow, People with Disabilities Committee Chairs Fahy and Santabarbara, and other distinguished members of the Legislature. I am Willow Baer, Commissioner of the New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD).

Thank you for inviting me to be here today to speak about the investments included in Governor Hochul's Fiscal Year 2027 Proposed Executive Budget that will benefit people with developmental disabilities, their families, not-for-profit providers, and our vital direct care workforce.

Since we last met, OPWDD has been laser focused on ensuring that people with developmental disabilities and the families that support them have a voice in our service system. This is demonstrated by initiatives like the implementation of our Office of Advocacy, which includes a team of people with developmental disabilities who advise me and my leadership team every day on our messaging, policy development, and program implementation. This year we supported the first full year of the Independent Ombudsman program, which has assisted hundreds of constituents. We helped increase awareness and reduce stigma through the creation of person-centered content like our "Accessing Life" podcast and "Know Your Rights" Booklet, both created by and for people with developmental disabilities. Our new Family Resources webpage makes it easier for new families to understand and navigate our system. And we are proud to have made video remote interpretation services available to families 24 hours a day/365 days a year, ensuring equitable access to support for all families statewide.

We continue our commitment to improve access to services for people of all ages and across a continuum of support needs. This year we expanded access to specialized services for people with the most complex needs in 9 state-operated Comprehensive Adult Transitional Homes, opened a second Specialty Hospital for children with neurodiversity and complex medical needs, and, in partnership with the Office for Mental Health, launched home-based crisis intervention and critical time transition programs for children and adults with developmental disabilities who have co-occurring mental health conditions. We opened 122 new units of supportive housing for people with developmental disabilities, moved close to 900 people into certified residential opportunities, and authorized nearly 7,000 people for housing subsidies to support them to live independently in the community. We continue to see significant growth in our Self Direction model, are about to launch our Home Enabling Supports technology service statewide, and we annually spend nearly \$50 million on Family



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Support Services, like respite, which assist families who are supporting their loved ones at home.

Over the past year, OPWDD has engaged directly with thousands of self-advocates and families throughout every part of the state to better understand how OPWDD programs are working for them and where we should prioritize transformation efforts. Through these discussions, facilitated in multiple languages, I have learned about the lived experience of people with developmental disabilities, and their families, when it comes to navigating this service system, and am focused on how we can improve the customer experience for all people who interact with our agency.

Based on community feedback, we are focused in the coming year on three foundational areas: effectiveness, customer experience, and sustainability. We are working to drive better outcomes for people; to promote positive customer experiences with state government; and to make sure that our service system is strong and able to provide needed supports for people well into the future.

I am now excited to highlight some of the proposals included in this year's proposed Executive Budget that respond directly to these fundamental goals.

Not only does the proposed 2027 Executive Budget continue the historic investments we discussed last year, but it provides new resources to address areas of critical need. Growing state spending on OPWDD programs by about \$343 million to over \$7.8 billion total, the Executive Budget represents a 4.6% increase in the OPWDD delivery system. And this during a year when the Federal Government's actions chip away at the Medicaid system. When including the federal share of reimbursement, the Fiscal Year 2027 budget makes \$13.8 billion in public funds available to support the OPWDD delivery system.

I would like to highlight, first and foremost, and for the fifth year in a row, Governor Hochul has proposed funding that recognizes the critical role that our providers and direct support staff play in the lives of people with developmental disabilities across New York State. The Fiscal Year 2027 Executive Budget proposes a 1.7 percent targeted inflationary increase, building on our momentum to address the rising operating costs throughout our service system. This investment, especially when combined with Governor Hochul's proposals to make New York State more affordable (proposals like an historic \$4.5 billion investment in childcare and Pre-K services that will help working families, a plan to lower the cost of auto insurance, and measures to improve access to health care and affordable housing), will absolutely support our workforce to continue providing vital direct care services.

When added to funding that has been invested since Governor Hochul took office for cost-of-living increases, inflationary increases, rate updates, and bonuses, the



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additional 1.7% would equal \$4.6 billion invested in the developmental disabilities service system. These investments have helped to improve recruitment and retention of staff for OPWDD's not-for-profit service providers. According to survey data from our providers, direct support professional vacancies have decreased by 43.5 percent, turnover has decreased 6.1 percent and starting wages have increased 28.6 percent since 2022. Coupled with initiatives like OPWDD's "More Than Work" recruitment campaign, and collaborations with the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals as well as the State University of New York (SUNY) to provide certifications, credentialing and college credits that professionalize our workforce, we have not only been able to improve retention and recruitment in our field, but have also increased the level of professionalism and job satisfaction, and significantly reduced the state's reliance on mandatory overtime.

You might recall that, last year, OPWDD enacted a short-term housing strategy to help stabilize access to residential services and housing across the continuum of our system. We know that access to safe and affordable housing is paramount to everything. That is why we launched the buildout of a new Housing Capacity Management platform to better match people to housing opportunities, established State Operations as a safety net provider for New Yorkers with the most complex needs, are working to streamline administrative procedures, and continually provide technical assistance and training to our non-profit partners. In addition to the work OPWDD has done to stabilize access to housing, this year's proposed budget includes a much-needed investment to enhance reimbursement for our Family Care providers, modernizing the rate for providers who support people with developmental disabilities in their homes. This rate enhancement is expected to increase utilization in one of OPWDD's most integrated certified residential services and continue to further our goal of stabilizing the continuum. Additionally, to further our goal to increase independent housing opportunities for people with developmental disabilities, the proposed Budget includes another \$15 million capital investment in community-based supportive housing projects. And, on the other end of the continuum, this year's budget will fund the final stages of construction of a 39-person Intensive Treatment facility.

The Governor has made it clear, through her 2026 State of the State and Fiscal Year 2027 Executive Budget, that people with disabilities are not an afterthought in New York State. She has advanced proposals related to accessible subway stations, adaptive clothing, rent freeze programs for aging New Yorkers with disabilities, access to higher education and health equity, and expanding accessibility at state parks.

OPWDD is particularly excited to highlight the proposed \$5 Million investment in an Assistive Technology Innovation Center to support research, commercialization, and startup of companies that are developing technologies to help people with disabilities become competitively employed and live more independently. This will build on the assistive technology partnership with SUNY announced last fall. This project is part of



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the greater push to make New York an Employment First State and will help grow employment for people with developmental disabilities.

I am proud of the progress OPWDD has made to better meet the needs of people we serve as we work to improve our service system, making it more effective, more responsive, and more sustainable. This work would not be possible without the incredible support that Governor Hochul and the members of *this* legislature have given our service system. Together, in collaboration and as we enact a new State Budget, I have no doubt that we will reach our goals of a more person-centered, inclusive, and accessible New York for people with developmental disabilities and their families.

Thank you for inviting me to be here today and for your support of this service system and of your constituents year-round. I look forward to your questions.