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Representatives of the Developmental Disabilities Alliance of Western New York (DDAWNY) from Buffalo and Rochester, Along with Advocates, Staff, and Families, Call on Governor Cuomo to Stop Human Services Sector's Collapse

Warn of "dire consequences" without immediate action by New York State to "stop the cuts, raise the wage, and fund the future"

BUFFALO, N.Y., May 24, 2021 – Representatives of the Developmental Disabilities Alliance of Western New York ([DDAWNY](#)) from Buffalo and Rochester along with advocates, staff, and families today called on Gov. Andrew Cuomo to intercede with Robert Mujica, Jr., Director, New York State Division of the Budget, to direct essential funds to address the dire wage crisis causing the state's developmental disability/human services infrastructure to collapse.

Specifically, DDAWNY is seeking to relieve the developmental disabilities staffing crisis by asking Cuomo to approve using \$250 million of federal relief funds already in state coffers to pay a living wage to direct support professionals (DSPs). In addition, the group is calling for the state legislature to quickly pass recently introduced legislation ([Senate bill S6879](#)) that would disallow cuts to reimbursements for residential habilitation services that are proposed to go into effect.

Speaking at a morning news conference held in downtown Buffalo, Jeff Paterson, a member of the DDAWNY Board of Directors, called the nearly 110,000 DSPs in residential homes and other facilities across the state "forgotten essential workers" and the "foundation of the service delivery system."

"We're here to sound the alarm," said Paterson. "The developmental disabilities field is facing a severe workforce shortage due to the state's refusal to pay for higher wages. It began several years ago, it has steadily gotten worse, and now it's a full-blown crisis. We are calling on Governor Cuomo and our state leaders to act now. This cannot go on."

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DDAWNY's three-point ask includes an effort to 1) "Stop the Cuts" by canceling a state-imposed funding cut on residential providers this month that will remove \$238 million from its statewide system annually; 2) "Raise the Wage" by raising rates over three years to provide DSPs with a living wage; and 3) "Fund the Future" by instituting a 2-percent annual cost-of-living adjustment – the same type of increase the state gives to other sectors.

Paterson said vacant positions at DDAWNY agencies have increased 34.5 percent since last year and 51.2 percent since 2019. He also cited data that shows nearly 78 percent of DSPs are women, 42 percent are people of color, and 32 percent are women of color.

Brenda McDuffie, who retired in February as president and CEO of the Buffalo Urban League and serves on the Board of Directors for one of the largest human services agencies in the Buffalo area, said ensuring a fair wage for caregivers is a racial justice and moral issue.

"The human services sector is carried on the backs of people – primarily women – and women of color," said McDuffie. They take care of our loved ones 24/7, 365 days a year. Without a fair living wage for these individuals, we suffer, our loved ones suffer, and the entire system is at risk of falling completely apart. We need them, and we need them to be fairly compensated so they can enjoy a higher quality of life."

Mary Beth Debus, the mother of a child with a disability, explained the challenges families face. "My daughter has been living in a group home for almost a decade, beginning at the age of 12," said Debus. "I have needed to entrust my daughter to the care of staff who are strangers to us – and there have been so many staff over the years. I learned early that forming strong relationships is risky because staff leave their jobs without warning and frequently. There has to be a way to create a meaningful career for staff so that the lives of those they support can be safe and full. That has to start with a livable wage."

Candyce Adams, who has worked in the field since 2004 and has risen to a management level position in a large residential home, said the staff shortage is at a crisis level. "We are all working double shifts and pulling staff from other homes," she said. Adams, a single mom who has a daughter with autism, said she never really leaves work. "We are constantly on call."

Adams says staff not only face physical harm, but also help residents, including those with dementia and Down Syndrome, with toileting, showering and other personal care needs. "It's difficult to find individuals willing to do this line of work when they can make more money flipping burgers. Is this how we want our loved ones to be cared for?," she asks.

Becky Garcia is another single mom "with three strong and courageous children" who has worked her way up the ranks to become a lead DSP for prevocational services. "In addition to working full time at a DDAWNY agency, I worked a part-time job for seven years to make ends meet, and it still wasn't always enough to get by," Garcia said. "We lived with our utilities shut off and even had to go without a vehicle at times."

“The majority of people in this field have families to support and struggle every day. Please consider us for a pay increase,” Garcia added.

BJ Stasio, president of the Board of Directors of the Self-Advocacy Association of New York State, said those with disabilities are looking for a hand up and not a handout from the state.

“We are all unique, human beings looking to lead richer lives, and without support staff, we can’t do that,” said Stasio, a South Buffalo resident who was born prematurely with Cerebral Palsy. “DSPs help us be visible, not invisible, and to lead somewhat normal lives. Is that too much to ask? Or would the state prefer we go back to the days of institutions and the inhumane treatment they provided?”

In 2005, the average wage for direct support professionals was 33 percent above minimum wage. Today, the average wage for a DSP is less than 2 percent above minimum wage.

“Make no mistake, that is a deliberate policy choice made by the State of New York,” Paterson emphasized.

“Since 2009, state officials have cut \$2.6 billion from the disability service system and we went more than a decade with no cost-of-living increases. That can never happen again. This year, thanks to the New York State Legislature’s advocacy, we are receiving a one-percent cost-of-living adjustment. That should be a down payment on future investments. We need an increase of at least two percent every year going forward – the same type of increase that the state gives to other sectors. We call on Governor Cuomo and the New York State Legislature to fund these annual increases so we can invest in the workforce that will carry this system forward.

“Governor Cuomo has a reputation as a problem solver, as a believer in social equity, and as a defender of those who are marginalized. He can underscore that legacy by stepping in and addressing this crisis before there are even more serious consequences,” Paterson concluded.

About DDAWNY

The Developmental Disabilities Alliance of Western New York (DDAWNY) is a collaborative group of 40 member voluntary agencies in Buffalo and Rochester that provide services to people with developmental disabilities. While honoring individual agency missions, it is the intent of the Alliance to assist agencies to develop relationships, promote unified strategies, and share risks for the mutual gain with and for the benefit of people with developmental disabilities. For more information visit: <https://www.ddawny.org>.

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