



DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES ALLIANCE OF WNY

June 15, 2021

Able2
Allegany Regional
Development Corporation
ARC of Genesee Orleans
Aspire of Western New York
Autism Services, Inc.
Bornhava
Buffalo Hearing and
Speech Center
Cantalcian Center for Learning
Center for Self Advocacy
Chautauqua Adult Day Services
Community Services for Every1
Cradle Beach
Directions In Independent Living
Easterseals New York
Epilepsy Association of
Western New York
Epilepsy-Pralid
Empower (formerly Niagara
Cerebral Palsy)
Excalibur Leisure Skills Center, Inc.
GiGi's Playhouse
Goodwill Industries
Great Lakes Water Sport Institute
Heritage Christian Services
Hillside Children's Center
Holy Childhood
Ibero American Action League Inc.
Intandem
Learning Disabilities Association of
Western New York
Lifetime Assistance
Lochland
OLV Human Services
Parent Network
Pathways, Inc.
People Inc.
Person Centered Services of WNY
Prevention 1st
Prime Care Coordination
The Arc Erie County New York
The Resource Center
Sasi
The Summit Center

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
NYS State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

You have earned a reputation as a problem solver, as a believer in social equity, and as a defender of those who are marginalized. We ask you to underscore that legacy by addressing the Direct Support Professional workforce shortage before there are serious consequences.

The field of intellectual and developmental disabilities is facing a severe workforce shortage. It began several years ago, it has steadily gotten worse, and now it's a full-blown crisis.

We are all hearing stories of worker shortages in other sectors. Those shortages are real, and we don't want to minimize them. However, many other businesses can shorten their hours, or even raise their prices to increase wages. Not-for-profit service providers cannot do either of those things. We provide 24/7 care to people with disabilities. Our prices are set by state government. No basket auction or golf tournament will ever be enough to fill the gap between what the state pays us and what our Direct Support Professionals deserve.

In 2005, the average wage for Direct Support Professionals was 33% above minimum wage. Today, the average DSP wage is less than 2% above minimum wage. Over the past 12 years, the OPWDD administration has proposed budgetary savings totaling \$2.6 billion, all in the name of "system sustainability." Unfortunately, these savings, along with a failure to provide sufficient periodic increases in funding necessary to keep wages significantly above minimum wage, have left Direct Support Professionals significantly behind workers in other sectors of New York's Care Economy.

For the past several years, as an unintended consequence of the drive to raise the minimum wage, it would appear to be state policy that fast food work is more valuable than work done by Direct Support Professionals – work that includes bathing, toileting, cooking, driving, healthcare, social support, and advocacy. That is wrong, it is unjust, and it should not be happening in the State of New York.

Why is a disabled life less valuable? Why is work done primarily by women – and disproportionately by women of color – valued less?

Now the proverbial chickens are coming home to roost. Our association represents 40 member agencies in the 17 westernmost counties of the state. From Buffalo down to the Southern Tier and over to the Finger Lakes, our member agencies now have more than 3,200 vacant DSP positions that cannot be filled. Vacant positions in our region are up 34.5% from last year, and 51.2% from 2019.

No New Yorker with a disability should have to plan what hours he will be able to use the bathroom because there isn't enough staff to help him. No New Yorker should lose sleep wondering if her child is safe in a group home because of 40% staff turnover. No New Yorker doing incredibly demanding work for 40-plus hours a week should then have to work a second or third job to make ends meet.

To be sure, we are dealing with an issue of equity not only for people with disabilities, but for women and people of color. Among DDAWNY member agencies, women make up 77.7% of the DSP workforce; people of color make up 41.5% of the DSP workforce; and women of color make up 31.9% of the DSP workforce. More than 2,500 women of color are affected by artificially low DSP wages. This situation is not sustainable.

The Developmental Disabilities Alliance of Western New York is a collaborative group of member voluntary agencies 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.

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The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
June 15, 2020
Stop the Cuts. Raise the Wage. Fund the Future.
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Therefore, our request is threefold:

- **Stop the Cuts.** The New York State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities is imposing yet another funding cut on residential providers this month. This cut will remove \$238 million from our statewide system annually. New York State has received billions of dollars in federal COVID aid to avoid these kinds of harmful cuts – yet OPWDD is going full-speed ahead with its reckless plan. Senator John Mannion of Syracuse introduced legislation on May 20 to prevent these cuts from being enacted. We call on the Legislature to pass that bill, and we ask you to sign it. You have the money in state coffers. There is no excuse to move forward with these cuts. We cannot pay a living wage to our staff when we're scrambling to fill yet another fiscal gap.
- **Raise the Wage.** The state budget includes \$740 million in federal relief funds to be specifically used to improve services for people with developmental disabilities. We are calling on your administration to earmark at least \$250 million to raise Direct Support Professionals to a living wage over the next three years. The federal government has designated staff recruitment, retention and incentive pay as a suitable use for the funds they have sent to New York State. If we spend \$250 million for this purpose, we will still have nearly \$500 million available for other purposes. We don't need studies, surveys and drawn-out planning processes. The system is on fire. Please direct Budget Director Mujica to release emergency funding now.
- **Fund the Future.** We are in this sad position today because we went more than a decade with no cost-of-living increases. That can never happen again. This year, thanks to the State Legislature's advocacy, we are receiving a 1% cost-of-living adjustment – an increase that will be wiped up by the May 1 residential cuts. That has been the pattern all along: the previous BFair2DirectCare increases for DSP wages were given with one hand and taken back with another, through ongoing rate reductions. There has been no net increase in funding to our field. Going forward, we need an increase of at least 2% every year – the same type of increase that the state gives to other sectors. We call on our partners in state government to fund these annual increases so we can invest in the workforce that will carry this system forward.

Stop the Cuts. Raise the Wage. Fund the Future. That is our call. There is no time to waste. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Rhonda Frederick
Board President
Developmental Disabilities Alliance of Western New York