



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

**State Fiscal Year 2025 Executive Budget Proposal
February 13, 2024**

Good morning, Chairs Krueger and Weinstein, Disability Committee Chairs Mannion and Seawright, 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 2025 Executive Budget Proposal and how it benefits New Yorkers with developmental disabilities.

I want to start by acknowledging and thanking both the Governor and the Legislature for their support of people with developmental disabilities and our service system. The last two budgets have included historic investments in the OPWDD system and demonstrated the State's commitment to the nearly 135,000 people who access our services. Your acknowledgement and commitment to people with developmental disabilities helps us to amplify their voices and improve their services.

OPWDD recently released updates on our Strategic Plan. The 5-Year Plan represents a continued effort to be responsive to people's needs, and to envision the future of our service system together, with our stakeholders.

The three overarching goals outlined in our Strategic Plan include strengthening our agency's infrastructure, transforming the system through innovation and change, and enhancing person-centered supports and services. As part of the first goal, strengthening our workforce continues to be our highest and most urgent priority.

Staffing levels of direct support professionals continue to be of great concern. And for the third consecutive year, the Governor's Executive Budget provides funds to support our providers in addressing this crisis. The proposed budget includes a 1.5% Cost of Living Adjustment, which would build on the previous two year's Budgets for a cumulative increase of nearly \$1 billion to OPWDD provider agencies. Additionally, over the last few years, significant investments have been made in the state's direct care workforce.

The proposed budget also supports recalculating provider reimbursement rates, known as rate rebasing. Rate rebasing is a federally required process where we update provider reimbursement to reflect changes in the actual cost of delivering services. The full annual gross value of rebasing will be \$350 million and when combined with the new resources associated with the proposed 1.5% COLA, will provide an increase of more than \$480 million for the provider network when fully implemented. These investments in our system will help service providers to maintain critical supports.

Additionally, OPWDD has made tremendous strides toward professionalizing and publicly elevating the direct support workforce through our partnerships with the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals and SUNY. These collaborations create a career ladder for DSPs through national certifications, while also providing opportunities to gain college credits. As highlighted recently on PBS Newshour, DSP's participating in the credentialing program have reported increased morale and improved outcomes for people they support. I am happy to report that to date, over 1,000 DSP's have been certified in NY.

DSPs participating in the credentialing program report feeling increased job satisfaction, pride, and are better prepared to do their challenging jobs. OPWDD has programmed over \$60 million in current year resources to continue support for these programs in the years ahead and will also be making them available to the state's direct support workforce. Working with the New York Alliance for Inclusion and Innovation, we are identifying best practices on recruitment and retention as a resource for service providers. In the coming weeks, OPWDD will launch a \$30 million statewide DSP Recruitment campaign to assist provider agencies with finding new staff. We know that there is no single solution to the current workforce crisis, and we will continue to pursue every opportunity to strengthen our direct care workforce.

The proposed Budget also supports our goal to transform the system through innovation and change. It includes legislation that would allow people with developmental disabilities and their families, once approved by a nurse, to train support staff to administer medication and perform simple tasks. This will benefit many people who strive for greater independence.

Additionally, the proposed Budget calls for the Most Integrated Settings Coordinating Council to update New York's Olmstead Plan, which will facilitate increased person-centeredness, choice and inclusion. This work will lead to more people with disabilities learning, working, and enjoying their lives within their communities.

The Executive Budget Proposal further supports our goal of system transformation by investing in new service opportunities. It devotes \$60 million in new State resources, which when matched by the federal government can total up to \$120 million. This investment helps to expand the services our sector provides.

The Governor's proposal continues the annual \$15 million investment in community-based, supportive housing. This funding builds on the \$125 million in capital resources invested since 2015 to develop independent housing opportunities for people with developmental disabilities.

The Executive Budget Proposal also aligns with our agency's second strategic goal to transform our system through innovation and change by including a \$6.7 million investment to fund the Governor's commitment to becoming an Employment First state. OPWDD, in partnership with the Chief Disability Officer, will lead this multi-agency effort to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

This investment builds on last year's commitment to make New York a model employer and to encourage New York businesses to employ people with disabilities. Backed by legislation sponsored by Senator Mannion and Assemblymember Burdick, and signed into law by the Governor, OPWDD has trained 144 businesses on the benefits of hiring people with developmental disabilities, and we are looking at ways to further expand the training's reach.

The Governor's proposed budget also includes a \$1 million dollar increase to Special Olympics NY funding to support their work with inclusive sports training, skill building, and competition, and provide health screenings and health education.

In alignment with the third goal of our strategic plan, to improve services and supports by making sure they are person-centered, OPWDD has prioritized strengthening diversity, equity, and inclusion within our service system. We have expanded our stakeholder engagement to include those who have been historically underserved by OPWDD, and we are working closely with community-based organizations and providers who have expertise in serving diverse communities to ensure our understanding of their needs. In addition, we are entering the second year of a 3-year project with Georgetown University's National Center for Cultural Competence to improve our cultural and linguistic capacity and our system's ability to serve all New Yorker's with developmental disabilities.

Finally, I am happy to report that with your support, particularly that of Senator Mannion and Assemblymember Woerner, OPWDD kicked off the "Look Beyond My Developmental Disability" anti-stigma campaign this past year. This campaign was created by people with developmental disabilities and the people who support them, and the positive feedback we have received has been tremendous.

This year, as we enact a new State Budget, I am hopeful that we will be able to continue pursuing and achieving our goals for improving how New York supports people with developmental disabilities – through a strong workforce, system innovation and improved supports and services. I look forward to working with all of you as we advance these goals and strive to create a more inclusive and accessible New York for people with developmental disabilities.