



NEW YORK
**ALLIANCE FOR
INCLUSION & INNOVATION**

**JOINT LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON FY2024 EXECUTIVE BUDGET:
NYS OFFICE FOR PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES**

Testimony of the New York Alliance for Inclusion and Innovation
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MENTAL HYGIENE BUDGET HEARING
Legislative Office Building in Albany
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Good morning/afternoon. Distinguished members of the NYS Senate and NYS Assembly, my name is Michael Seereiter and I am the President & CEO of the New York Alliance for Inclusion and Innovation (NY Alliance). The NY Alliance is a statewide association representing nearly 130 not-for-profit agencies serving people with disabilities. Our association envisions a society where people with disabilities are contributing citizens with equal rights and the ability to live full, productive and meaningful lives.

It is an honor to testify at this Mental Hygiene budget hearing. These hearings are a part of the Legislative Review process, where the public has the opportunity to testify and speak directly to the Legislature about the proposed budget and the real life impact this spending plan has on the general citizenry and the individuals receiving vital services that are supported by this Executive Budget. On behalf of the NY Alliance, our member organizations, and the thousands of individuals and families we serve, thank you for allowing me to testify today and share my perspective on the FY 2024 Executive Budget.

In the interest of saving time, I have attached to my testimony the NY Alliance's Executive Budget & Legislative Priorities for 2023-2024.

First, I want to publicly thank Governor Hochul for not continuing a decades-long failure to invest in this sector. This budget does not propose any cuts to the NYS Office for People With Developmental Disabilities' (OPWDD) system. We are extremely appreciative of this fact.

Today, my comments will be brief and laser-focused on the Direct Support Professional (DSP) workforce crisis and the imbalanced approach that Governor Hochul's budget is taking to address the workforce crisis in the OPWDD proposed budget.





As you know, there has been a DSP workforce crisis brewing nationally for many years and the Pandemic made a bad situation even worse. Allow me to bring some perspective to this issue.

This past November, OPWDD released its Strategic Plan for 2023-2027. This comprehensive planning document identified that OPWDD and many other human service sectors are facing a workforce shortage that was worsened by COVID-19.

OPWDD's Strategic Plan, published in November, articulates as Goal #1, "Improve the recruitment, retention and quality of the direct support workforce," by "investing in the workforce." The system faces "a 35.6% turnover rate in the voluntary DSP workforce, a vacancy rate of 17.2% for full time positions, and a vacancy rate of 21.3% for part-time positions."

This ongoing staffing crisis impacts our provider's ability to provide the necessary and quality services needed to support people and their families.

One more statistic to frame this issue: The average hourly wage of a DSP serving persons with an Intellectual or Developmental Disability (I/DD) is \$16.07 an hour. That equates to an annual salary of less than \$33,500. Is this an appropriate salary for a direct support *professional* providing life-sustaining services?

We began to see evidence that the investments from last year were beginning to make a difference. In the FY 2023 Executive Budget, Governor Hochul, for the first time in years, proposed a 5.4% COLA for the Human Services sector. The Legislature approved that COLA in the FY 2023 Enacted Budget. Thank You! This, coupled with one-time American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds and the state's healthcare/mental health worker bonus program, we were feeling optimistic about the state's recognition of the nonprofit DSP workforce and finding ways to address the workforce crisis.

As a result of these investments, the overall vacancy rate dipped below 17 percent and the turnover rate went from 36 percent to under 31 percent.

While OPWDD's Five-Year Strategic Plan makes workforce its #1 priority, the Governor's FY 2024 budget for OPWDD falls woefully short in making critical resources available for the nonprofit sector of the workforce.

The NY Alliance and New York Disability Advocates, along with numerous human services coalitions, have been requesting an 8.5% COLA and a \$4,000 wage enhancement for the



nonprofit sector's direct support professionals. The basic premise of these investments was to simply keep pace with the growing costs of providing services to people with I/DD after a decade of no COLAs. Unfortunately, this budget proposal underfunds the COLA by 6% and does not provide the wage enhancement for DSPs.

To add insult to injury, while the thousands of hardworking DSPs in our nonprofit sector will not see salary adjustments, the Governor's budget includes \$50 million for salary increases to the state's DSP workforce. While the Division of the Budget will tell you this a "geographical pay differential" proposal - DON'T BE FOOLED - it is a base salary enhancement!

Here is the Governor's proposal:

- Direct Support Assistants working in upstate programs, will receive an increase of 8.85% (going from \$21.13 per hour to over \$23 per hour; and in the downstate state operated programs, state DSPs will receive a 10.7% increase (from \$22.39 to at least \$25 per hour); and
- Developmental Disabilities Secure Care Treatment Aid employees at the Sunmount and Valley Ridge campuses, will see their starting salaries jump from \$46,661 to over \$59,000 (a 26.4 percent raise; equating to \$29 per hour!).

The proposed wage enhancement for the state workforce will be the second permanent wage increase for state-operated workers in the past year, leaving nonprofit workers, who do the same job, with a starting hourly rate of around \$16 an hour, falling further and further behind.

Let me be very clear: This is an insult and a slap in the face to the nonprofit sector and to the thousands of dedicated professionals caring for the 130,000 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in this state.

Shame on the Governor for leaving our DSPs out of the NEW YORK DREAM!!

It's important for me to state that DSPs in New York are the men and women who carry out incredibly varied and important responsibilities to support people with developmental disabilities and help them live safe, fulfilling lives. DSPs exemplify diversity. Nearly three quarters are women, many of whom are single mothers, and over half are either black or Latino. They are professionals who are highly trained in a wide variety of critical areas, and they also must know the laws, regulations and procedures designed to protect individuals.





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The Governor's budget is the starting point for the FY 2024 spending plan. As we all know, the NYS Legislature plays a vitally important role reshaping and improving the proposed budget. I have great faith in the Legislature to take this budget proposal and make the necessary changes to support the entire DSP workforce and the IDD population who relies on direct support professionals to live a quality life.

Thank you for your public service and your attention to our field.

