



Office for People With Developmental Disabilities

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

State Fiscal Year 2024 Executive Budget Proposal February 16, 2023

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 2024 Executive Budget and how it benefits New Yorkers with developmental disabilities.

First, I want to thank the Legislature for the funding in last year's budget which included a historic investment in the OPWDD system and demonstrated the State's commitment to the 131,000 people with developmental disabilities who access services through our system. Your acknowledgement of and commitment to people with developmental disabilities helps us to amplify their voices and improve their services.

In November, with the support of Governor Hochul, OPWDD released its first 5-year Strategic Plan in over a decade. Based on intensive stakeholder outreach and dialogue, our Plan represents a joint effort between the agency and our dedicated community, including people with developmental disabilities, their families and our service providers.

Our Strategic Plan is truly the collective work of hundreds, if not thousands of people from across our state. It represents our shared goals and objectives for moving our service system forward to better meet the changing needs of people with developmental disabilities, while prioritizing equity and ensuring sustainability.

Together, we outlined priorities and set a course for the coming years. The three overarching goals outlined within our Strategic Plan include strengthening the workforce, transforming the system through innovation and change, and enhancing person-centered supports and services.

The Governor's 2024 Executive Budget aligns with our first and most critical goal to strengthen the workforce by building on the 5.4% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) provided in the current fiscal year, with the inclusion of an additional 2.5% COLA for OPWDD's non-profit providers. This is the first time a Governor has provided back-to-back COLA investments in more than a decade. Combined these investments will provide more than \$700 million towards increased costs, including staff wages.

OPWDD welcomes this critical provision and is grateful for any additional increases that will help improve our ability to recruit and retain essential direct care and clinical staff, the majority of whom are women of color. The direct care workforce strives to empower people with developmental disabilities and support them as they achieve their personal goals. Their commitment was evident during the late December storm in Buffalo. Many staff missed holiday celebrations with their families and worked multiple days in a row ensuring that people were safely supported. This is just one example of the dedication demonstrated by direct care staff in every corner of the state.

While the workforce crisis is our highest and most urgent priority, the Governor's Budget also proposes targeted investments that address critical needs and support important policy reforms. These vital investments align with priorities identified by our stakeholders in our Strategic Plan.

The proposed Budget 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 other simple nursing tasks. This will benefit many people who strive for greater independence.

To ensure that New Yorkers with developmental disabilities are supported to have full access to services, the proposed Budget funds a Statewide Ombudsman Program for people eligible to receive OPWDD services. This program will provide an independent advocate who will help people navigate the service system and resolve disputes.

The Executive Budget further supports the goal of system transformation by continuing investments in new service opportunities to meet the needs of people coming into our system for the first time. It invests new State resources, which when leveraged by federal ~~and local governments~~resources, adds up to \$120 million. This investment ensures we can continue our work to expand the continuum of services and fully implement a person-centered approach.

The proposed Budget continues the annual \$15 million capital investment in community-based housing. With this additional funding, the State has invested a total of \$125 million in capital resources to develop independent housing opportunities for people with developmental disabilities since 2016. These funds are separate and distinct from resources available through the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative, which also provides opportunities for people with developmental disabilities.

Finally, the Executive Budget supports our third goal by enhancing services for people with complex needs. An investment of \$11.7 million in capital funding will allow us to

expand our capacity to support people with complex needs through the development of additional inpatient treatment opportunities at the Finger Lakes Developmental Center campus.

A key priority also identified by stakeholders is to strengthen diversity, equity, and inclusion in our service system and to expand our stakeholder engagement to include those who have been historically underserved by OPWDD. By enhancing the capacity of community-based organizations and small providers who have expertise in serving diverse communities, we will continue to work toward a system that is overall more culturally and linguistically responsive to all New Yorkers with developmental disabilities.

Just as the people we support are not all the same, neither are the solutions that need to be in place. People with developmental disabilities should be embraced as vital and participating members of their communities. To accomplish that, we need to have a system that enables people with developmental disabilities to have full and appropriately supported lives within their communities regardless of their age, background or level of need.

I understand that these are big goals, but I believe they are goals that we are well on our way to accomplishing with your support. We look forward to an enacted Budget that will allow us to advance OPWDD's supports and services and empower people to live the lives they want to live.

I look forward to working with all of you as we make these critical system improvements a reality.