



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

John W. Mannion

## People with disabilities demand fund in N.Y. budget to permanently raise staff pay

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| ISSUE: **DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS, FAIR WAGES**

Workers who care for New Yorkers with disabilities said Monday they no longer want to have the same fiscal battle with state lawmakers over their salaries each year — pushing the Legislature this budget cycle to include a fund to permanently boost wages.

Hundreds of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities rallied in Albany on Monday to fight for more support for staff who work for nonprofit providers and help the viability of the field.

"We all need to be paid the way we're supposed to be, and we haven't been for a long time," New York Disability Advocates President Mike Alvaro said. "It's time for them to start investing in us. We care for our individuals so our individuals can live their lives the way they're supposed to."

Disability advocates and their caretakers from across the state are fighting for a 3.2% Cost of Living Adjustment increase for staff, up from Hochul's proposed 1.5%. COLA funding helps nonprofits with food, supplies, transportation, maintenance, employee benefits, insurance costs and more.

They also want to create the Direct Support Wage Enhancement or fund to give employees who make under \$125,000 annually a \$4,000 benefit — increasing pay \$2.19 per hour.

"This is not easy work," said Alvaro, who is also the president and CEO of the Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York state. "We all need to be paid the way we're supposed to be."

Nonprofit providers outside New York City make an average wage of \$16.48 an hour compared to \$24.74 cents for staff in state-operated programs, according to New York Disability Advocates.

Lawmakers on both sides of the political aisle agree the state needs to make a greater investment in direct support professionals. The key will be to get legislative leaders and Gov. Kathy Hochul on board.

Assemblywoman Aileen Gunther, chair of the Assembly Mental Health committee, said she will be loud in pushing legislative leaders and Hochul to prioritize budget investments in people with disabilities and their care providers.

"They just have to prioritize," Gunther said. "There's a lot of money in this budget and there's enough money to pay these folks. The 3.2% is not much to ask for.

"These are human lives," she added.

At least 85% of people with disabilities in the state receive care from a nonprofit provider. And most nonprofit providers are dealing with an annual staff turnover rate of 30%, with most vacancies in excess of 17%, according to New York Disability Advocates.

The turnover disrupts a person with a disability's quality of care, and quality of life.

"We need the care, and we need the staff to support us," said Diego Ortiz, a New Yorker with cerebral palsy who traveled to Albany on Monday with CP Unlimited Hudson Valley. "If we need help, and sometimes we don't get that because they come and go. And it's not fair. And it's not right."

Employees who don't work under the state Office for People with Developmental Disabilities were not included in pay raises included in the last two budgets. The 2022 budget included a 13% pay raise for direct-care staff in state-operated programs, and last year's budget increased starting wages to \$23 an hour for staff upstate and \$25 per hour in New York City.

Several Republican lawmakers joined Monday's rally — many who are angered by the budgeting priorities Hochul made in her executive spending plan, such as \$2.4 billion to help New York City with services for migrants from the southern border.

Assemblyman Phil Palmesano is a former direct support professional and said nonprofits must have more state resources to give staff a living wage for good.

"They want to take care of these individuals, but they can only do it for so long if they're not getting to take care of their own lifestyle and their family's lifestyle when they can go work for Burger King or McDonald's and make 2 or 3 more bucks an hour," Palmesano said.

"There's something wrong with that."

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