



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

**State Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Budget Proposal  
February 5, 2025**

Good morning, Chairs Krueger and Pretlow, Disability Committee Chairs Fahy and Santabarbara, and other distinguished members of the Legislature. I am Willow Baer, Acting Commissioner of the New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD).

Thank you for inviting me to be here today to speak about the historic investments included in Governor Hochul's Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Budget that benefit people with developmental disabilities, their families, not-for-profit providers, and our vital direct care workforce.

In my time as the Acting Commissioner, I have had the privilege of traveling around the state to speak with many of our stakeholders, many of you and your constituents. This has allowed me to better understand the needs of people with developmental disabilities and the challenges the system faces. I have learned about innovative approaches many of our providers are working on and have heard from people with disabilities about what they want, such as improved access to quality healthcare, housing, and employment. I have also seen the importance of prioritizing efforts that enhance our provider network, advance our workforce, and respond to the changing demographics of our state.

I am excited to highlight several of the proposals included in this year's Executive Budget that respond directly to the requests of people and families, challenges providers have shared, and to what I believe our service system truly needs.

For the fourth year in a row, Governor Hochul has included funding that recognizes the imperative role that our providers and direct support staff play in the lives of people with developmental disabilities across New York State. The Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Budget includes an ongoing investment of \$850 million for recent rate increases, allowing our not-for-profit service providers to afford the increased cost of doing business and, most importantly, to increase wages for frontline staff.

Additionally, this Executive Budget proposes a 2.1% targeted inflationary increase to further address the rising operating costs in our service system. These investments, especially when combined with Governor Hochul's historic \$5 billion proposal to make New York State more affordable, provide incredible support towards the stabilization of our provider network and advancement of our vital workforce.



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When added to funding that has been provided since 2022 for cost-of-living increases, rate updates, bonuses, and American Rescue Plan projects, these proposals equal almost \$4 billion invested in the developmental disabilities service system to improve recruitment and retention of staff for OPWDD's not-for-profit service providers. Coupled with initiatives like OPWDD's "More Than Work" recruitment campaign, and collaborations with the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals as well as the State University of New York (SUNY) to provide certifications, credentialing and college credits that professionalize our workforce, we have been able to improve retention and recruitment in our field, as well as significantly reduce the state's reliance on mandatory overtime for these workers.

While we all understand that increased funding for providers and enhanced wages for our workforce are imperative to this service system's ability to provide quality supports and services, we also recognize that the demographics of our state and needs of those we serve are continuously changing. Which is why, as an agency, we have prioritized additional efforts to support people by improving access to both certified and non-certified housing, investing in technology advancements for people to live more independently, and reducing the administrative burden on providers, as part of our strategic plan and short-term housing strategy. It is also why we are prioritizing the changing needs of an aging population, as well as the complexities of serving people with disabilities and co-occurring mental health diagnoses. And, as an agency, we remain committed to efforts that ensure we are meeting the needs of all communities in New York State, through our diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts which include staff training, extensive stakeholder engagement, and strengthening the linguistic and cultural competence of our system, at all levels.

The Executive Budget continues investments in new service opportunities to meet the needs of people coming into our system or whose needs have changed with \$30 million in new State resources which, when matched by the federal government, can total up to \$120 million on a full annual basis. To further our goal to increase independent housing opportunities for people with developmental disabilities, the proposed Budget also continues the annual \$15 million investment in community-based housing projects.

Around the state, I have repeatedly heard about the challenges that people with disabilities are facing as they try to meet their basic healthcare needs. Some people wait years for dental care, others can't find a doctor to serve them because the offices are not accessible for physical or sensory needs. And some have simply not received care because doctor's offices do not have the right equipment to meet people's specialized or mobility needs. This year's budget includes funding to reduce these gaps in healthcare for people with disabilities.

To increase access to health services, a \$25 million capital funding investment is proposed in this year's Executive Budget to support the creation of Regional Disability



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Clinics at existing Article 28 and Article 16 clinic locations across the state. These grants will be awarded through OPWDD and funding will be used to update or expand buildings, equipment, and technology, to increase accessibility and improve the quality of healthcare provided to people with developmental disabilities.

The Governor's proposed budget also calls for a \$75 million dollar investment in OPWDD's Institute for Basic Research in Developmental Disabilities, otherwise known as IBR. IBR opened in 1968 as the first large-scale institute in the world designed to conduct basic and clinical research into the causes of developmental disabilities. This important funding for IBR will be used to modernize the institute's infrastructure and expand its capacity to conduct cutting edge research that will help identify a person's medical and behavioral health needs earlier in their life. Significantly, it would also include an establishment of a Genomics Core Facility to better understand how genetics influence people's developmental disabilities and underlying medical conditions. It will situate IBR to become a national organization for rare diseases that delivers top tier diagnostic testing for people with developmental disabilities and serve as a nationwide resource.

In addition to increasing access to healthcare, people with disabilities have repeatedly shared their interest in meaningful, gainful employment. We are proud that Governor Hochul signed Executive Order 40, making New York an Employment First State and has continued her commitment in this year's budget with two proposals that increase tax credits for businesses that hire people with disabilities as well as proposing to make changes to New York's Preferred Source Program permanent. We must continue to prioritize making sure that people with developmental disabilities have access to competitive employment throughout our communities. At OPWDD, I have prioritized hiring people with developmental disabilities, ensuring that our agency decision-making is informed by those that our decisions impact most, and I cannot overstate the benefits that hiring someone with a developmental disability can add to the workplace.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not highlight the important investment being proposed to commemorate New York State's Disability Rights History by establishing a Willowbrook Center for Learning on the former State School property. What happened at Willowbrook forever changed the way we provide services and supports for people with disabilities. In fact, the advocacy of people who lived at Willowbrook, and their family members, sparked a nationwide civil rights movement that continues to this day. The Center for Learning will forever preserve Willowbrook's historic significance by highlighting how far we have come and will serve as a reminder of what we must continue to fight for.

I am proud of the progress OPWDD has made to better meet the needs of those we serve since the closure of Willowbrook. I also know there is more work to be done, which would not be possible without the incredible support that Governor Hochul and



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members of this legislature have given our service system. Together, in collaboration, as we enact a new State Budget, I have no doubt that we can reach our goals of a more person-centered, inclusive, and accessible New York for people with developmental disabilities and their families.

Thank you for allowing me to be here today. I look forward to your questions.