

## New York State Failed To Prioritize Disability Services Again

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Organizations providing critical supports to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) in New York have been facing a workforce crisis for more than three years.

Direct support professionals, or DSPs, who support people with I/DD in the community and in group homes earn minimum wage thanks to embarrassingly low payment rates from New York State (NYS) Medicaid. DSPs perform critical work, supporting people with disabilities, guiding them through daily activities, working with people in life and death situations and often spending more time with the people they support than with their own families.

They deserve wages that match their essential contribution. As the job is difficult and the pay is low, providers struggle to hire new DSPs and retain current ones. Even fast-food jobs pay better.

For more than a decade, the Cuomo administration enforced extreme austerity, either cutting Medicaid reimbursement rates or refusing to increase them by more than 1 percent. This decade of cuts, combined with the COVID 19 pandemic, inflamed the workforce crisis to the point where we are today, risking program closure and denying people with I/DD the support they need.

This year, disability service providers and our workforce mobilized to secure an 11 percent cost of living adjustment (COLA) increase to the Medicaid rates for Human Services. Both the NYS Assembly and Senate incorporated the 11 percent COLA, in some form, in their one-house budgets, but it did not make it into the budget voted into law last week.

Instead, Gov. Hochul secured half a billion dollars for the private owners of the Buffalo Bills, giving human services workers a 5.4 percent COLA increase and one-time bonuses. This is not a budget that is serious about long-term health for the disability services field. Staff will continue to work overtime just to pay their bills as the new rates fail to get full-time DSP salaries to \$40,000 a year.

The workforce crisis will continue to spiral out of control. Staff will have to work overtime to cover shifts and pay their bills, and day programs will stay closed without the necessary staff. These consequences belie the fact that the 5.4 percent COLA is still higher than anything the sector has seen in the last decade.

Many providers spent more time thanking the governor for the increase than advocating for more because they have been conditioned by years of neglect.

We can no longer adjust to austerity. For years, the state sent the message that our staff and the people we support are not a priority.

We heard it again with this budget. This small increase is not enough to make providers whole. While we do not command the power and influence of the owner of an NFL team, we can assure the governor we will be relentless in our pursuit of budget justice next year, with the power and influence of thousands of DSPs behind us instead.