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HEALTH

Nine NJ disability programs are on the budget chopping block. Here's what could be lost



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Key Points

- Gov. Phil Murphy's state budget proposal eliminates $4 million in grants for disability programs.
- Nonprofit groups that help clients find therapy, employment, housing and other services are mobilizing to fight.

Several nonprofit programs that support New Jerseyans with developmental disabilities are facing elimination under Gov. Phil Murphy's proposed budget, a prospect that has alarmed advocates who say they provide critical support to the community.

Murphy's $58.1 billion budget plan, now in state lawmakers' hands, includes $4 million in cuts to grants handed out annually by the state's Division of Developmental Disabilities. The money supports nonprofits that provide disabled New Jerseyans with physical and occupational therapy, legal help to negotiate with insurers, job training and other services.

"It wasn't a surgical cut. It was a flat cut of the whole line," said Thomas Baffuto, executive director of The Arc of New Jersey, one of the state's biggest disability service providers. "From what we understand, they didn't look at what was in those lines before cutting them."

Story continues after gallery.

State officials note that Murphy's fiscal 2026 plan includes a huge increase for disability programs the state runs itself. The DDD's budget is slated to see an additional $390 million in state and federal funding, said Tom Hester, a spokesman for the Department of Human Services, which oversees the division.

Under Murphy, the division's budget has more than tripled to over $2.5 billion, he said.

“The Murphy Administration has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to improving services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities," Hester said via email. "Through a combination of oversight, accountability, and targeted investments, the state has worked to ensure that people with IDD receive the support, dignity, and respect they deserve."

Murphy, in his February budget address, said the administration was forced to make "hard decisions" on the state's fiscal future. New Jersey could lose billions in Medicaid support and other funding in the federal budget being hammered out by Republicans in Washington.

Still, disability advocates say the relatively small nonprofit grants on the chopping black in New Jersey are vital to filling gaps that the state doesn't cover — and to helping people navigate a complicated system of public and private benefits.

From lawyers to therapy providers, program leaders reported similar conversations in recent weeks with leadership at the DDD. The cuts were not the division's choice but were made higher up in the administration, they were informed.

Now that lawmakers have the budget to vote on, nonprofits have been told, “it’s out of our hands,” according to Buffuto.

He said he's sympathetic to the constraints facing the state. At the same time, the nonprofits counter, the roughly $4 million total cost for their programs is about .007% of the total proposed budget.

Here's a list of programs they are fighting for.

Planning for Adult Life

Among the initiatives slated for elimination is Planning for Adult Life, a statewide program managed by The Arc of New Jersey and Community Access Unlimited. Each year, it helps over 7,000 students ages 14 to 21 make the transition from school to adult life, Baffuto said. Planning for Adult Life helps participants apply for Medicaid and services. It also helps students find employment and occupational therapy and with planning for housing and transportation needs.

This transition is often referred to as "falling off a cliff" in the disability community. That's how families describe the sudden shift when someone with developmental disabilities turns 21 and ages out of school-based services.

"The worst day for a family is when the school bus stops coming," Baffuto said. "We lay it all out for them — when to apply for Medicaid, who to call, what services to consider — so they don't fall off a cliff when school ends."

The state's $497,000 in annual funding pays for seven staff members who work in schools and communities across New Jersey. Without it, Baffuto said, the program will likely shut down. "There's no extra money to shuffle around. We run lean, and we've already gone through every possible scenario."

Community Living Education

The Rutgers Community Living Education Project helps people with disabilities move out of institutions or school settings and into homes in their communities. It could lose its annual funding of $545,000. Supporters said it also guides families through applying for housing and employment services, while keeping an eye on ways to help them live more independently. The program has been operating for over 30 years and serves a wide range of ages, its website says.

"We provide education, training and resources regarding the possibilities of community living within New Jersey," the site says. All of the services are provided

free of charge.

Developmental Disabilities Center

Another program affected is the Developmental Disabilities Centers run by Atlantic Health System, with locations in Union and Cedar Knolls. The proposed cut would eliminate the program's $295,000 budget. The center provides medical care, psychiatric evaluations, therapy and medication management for adults with developmental disabilities. It serves people living in group homes, in supervised apartments or at home with family, and is one of the few initiatives in the state designed to coordinate both physical and behavioral health services for people with disabilities, Atlantic Health said.

Donated Dental Services

The Dental Lifeline Network's Donated Dental Services, which received $170,000 in funding in the 2022-2023 budget, offers free dental care to older and disabled residents who can't otherwise afford it. Since 1988, it has served almost 10,000 New Jerseyans with over $28.9 million in donated services, the nonprofit's website says.

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Mom2Mom

Mom2Mom is a Rutgers-based helpline for parents of adults with disabilities. The program, which would have gotten $90,000 for its budget, connects caregivers with trained peers who help them navigate state disability services. It was launched in 2010 to fill a gap in support for families once their children age out of school-based help.

Arc of Monmouth

Founded in 1949 by families, The Arc of Monmouth supports clients with intellectual and developmental disabilities by offering therapy, job training, educational programs and more to help people "lead fulfilling, independent lives," its website says. The group is set to lose $295,000 that funds psychiatric and mental health counseling at its clinic in Monmouth County.

"That program was also in this lump of programs that got cut," Baffuto said. "So I'm trying to get that restored, too."

Community Health Law Project

The Community Health Law Project, in operation for 50 years, is slated to lose $350,000 in state funding. The money pays for attorneys who help clients secure housing, disability benefits, home care, insurance coverage and protection from abuse, proponents say.

"We're deeply concerned about what will happen to the hundreds of people who count on this help," its Executive Director Erika Kerber in an interview.

Centers for Independent Living

New Jersey's Centers for Independent Living, which help people with disabilities find jobs and housing, allowing them to leave institutions, are facing a proposed $3 million reduction. "This is a devastating setback to the disability community," said Donald Campbell, executive director of the program.

Transition to Adult Coordinated Care

The initiative, run by the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and based in Plainsboro, helps teens and young adults with developmental disabilities move into the adult world of health care and support services. It works with families to figure out medical needs, plan for housing, and connect with therapy and mental health services. The amount of its state funding wasn't immediately available.

What's next?

Baffuto warned that if federal Medicaid funding is reduced later this year, the entire disability services system could be destabilized. “If Medicaid gets cut, that’s the foundation of all the services people rely on,” he said.

Despite the uncertainty, Baffuto said he’s hopeful the Legislature will step in before the final budget is signed in June.

“We’re going to stay at this until the ink is dry,” he said. “These programs change lives — and we’re not going down without a fight.”