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OPWDD unveils plan to spend \$1.5B in federal funding to increase workforce wages, retention

The state Office for People with Developmental Disabilities has released a draft plan of improvement to take place during the next five years, including how it intends to spend more than \$1.5 billion in federal aid.

The funds, from the American Rescue Plan, will go toward recruiting and retaining more direct-support professionals—the employees who work directly with people with disabilities receiving OPWDD services—according to the 5.07 strategic plan released at the end of May.

The office plans to work with Gov. Kathy Hochul's administration on short- and long-term solutions including a supplemental one-time payment to support current DSPs who have worked during the Covid-19 pandemic, bonuses for fully vaccinated employees and one-time workforce longevity and retention bonuses, which are projected to equal 20% of total compensation. The exact pandemic and vaccination bonus amounts were not disclosed.

According to the 2020 National Core Indicators Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Staff Stability Survey, which is distributed to providers annually, the New York DSP population has faced retention challenges. The workforce has a 35.6% turnover rate, a 17.2% vacancy rate for full-time positions and a 21.3% vacancy rate for part-time jobs. The OPWDD reported that the pandemic exacerbated retention issues but said direct-support personnel have been fighting for better pay for years. The starting annual salary for direct-support assistants is \$42,419.

The spending-plan draft was praised by The Arc New York, one of the largest providers of disability services in the state.

“After years without sufficient funding or a strategic plan, we are facing an unprecedented workforce crisis,” the nonprofit said in a statement. “The 5.07 plan must put emphasis on implementing immediate and long-term solutions to stabilizing our workforce.”

People who work at The Arc said providers can have a hard time attracting and retaining staff because employees are paid low wages for work that can be challenging, work they don’t necessarily get to leave at work.

“Staff are coaching, mentoring, caretaking, getting residents home to their families, getting family involved,” said Theresa Wellington, an assistant residential manager at Liberty Arc, a central New York regional office of The Arc. DSPs “are constantly thinking about the residents, their relationship with their community.”

Wellington said that in her experience, group homes often are understaffed and employ many “relief” employees who work part time when their schedule allows—which creates patchy schedules. When there aren’t enough employees on a shift, the program doesn’t meet supervision requirements for activities and residents don’t get out into their communities to do what they love. Camping trips, vacations and even trips to get coffee all run the risk of being canceled because of understaffing. Sometimes, Wellington said, there are so few employees on a shift that residents’ medical appointments are canceled.

Being understaffed also can lead to training and quality issues, which ultimately could result in dangerous situations for residents and employees—and leaves employees demoralized.

Rebekah Schuyler, who has worked at Liberty Arc for 23 years, recalled a time when staffing was double what it is now.

“Twenty years ago, we would have eight people on a shift, and now we’re hitting the four-person minimum,” Schuyler said. “I’ve worked multiple shifts being a manager and a DSP at once.”

The OPWDD declined multiple interview requests to discuss the specifics of spending contained in the plan. It answered questions only in writing.

The 5.07 plan includes several other recruitment and retention solutions. The OPWDD plans to partner with high schools, the state Education Department and providers to replicate a DSP training pilot program that originally launched in 2020. The office also plans to partner with the State University of New York to train DSPs through 10 of its Educational Opportunity Centers; launch a marketing campaign to help track recruitment and retention of DSPs; partner with the Department of Labor to increase the DSP candidate pool; and create a DSP occupational code to identify employees—which is designed to improve research on the workforce.

Also included in the draft are plans to improve how the OPWDD collects and shares data. The office said it will work with the state Office of Information Technology Services to change its data-collection technology so it can gather more years' worth of Medicaid data, identify new information to make transparent to stakeholders and explore new ways to communicate findings.

Plans to improve support, services and employment opportunities for people with disabilities are included in the draft. Disabled New Yorkers are underemployed: according to the OPWDD, pre-pandemic data indicated an employment rate of 34.4%.

The OPWDD said it will use the federal funding to incentivize day program providers to offer prevocational and career-planning services, increase staff training to better help participants become independent, and enhance existing vocational and employment opportunities so they can support more people. It said it also will work with Hochul's office so training and toolkits are available to more businesses that might want to begin employing people with disabilities.

The OPWDD said it also will invest in researching the impact of Medicaid managed care plans on service recipients.

The Department of Health released its first plan for how to spend ARPA funds, which go toward bolstering states' home- and community-based services programming, in August. The OPWDD sought and got approval from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services for its plan in July and submitted an appendix in September—which was approved in November. Public comments on the draft are not yet available.

The 5.07 plan is available in several languages, and the OPWDD is now gathering feedback. There will be virtual statewide hearings to discuss the draft June 8 and 9, it said, and the agency plans to release a schedule for in-

person forums across the state during the summer. The OPWDD expects to finalize the plan in the fall and then submit it to the Legislature. —Jacqueline Neber