

Op-Ed: Rising costs endanger disability day programs

BRIAN FITZGERALD | MAY 30, 2022 | [OPINION](#)

'COVID-19 has made the already strained system of disability services unworkable'



Brian Fitzgerald

Individuals living with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) deserve to have access to services empowering them to live their lives to the fullest. This population includes people with cerebral palsy, autism, and many other types of disabilities. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has made the already strained system of disability services unworkable. Providers have seen site closures, layoffs, and individuals stuck at home with no access to their communities. At Easterseals New Jersey, we have seen costs rise 12% over the last year, but compensation has not kept pace.

Many disability services in New Jersey are billed by the hour. This model means providers only get reimbursed when an individual shows up for the program, though we must pay staff to accommodate regardless of participant attendance. Additionally, those deemed as requiring less support are reimbursed at a rate which does not cover the cost of care.

With COVID-19 still lingering and costs continuing to rise, the future of day programs for the I/DD population is in doubt. These programs offer the opportunity to learn life skills, socialize, connect with valuable resources, and give family members flexibility. In fiscal year 2021, 91% of our program

participants reported overall satisfaction with services, leaving them with increased function, mood and sociability. We need proper funding to continue providing this valued service to our program participants.

You can be a part of the change

For Easterseals NJ to keep providing the best level of care for the I/DD population, the state of New Jersey's investment in disability services needs to match the need in the community. We applaud Gov. Murphy for proposing \$41.4 million to support our frontline direct support professionals who staff these vital programs and for locking in the modest additional funding we have seen over the last year. We now urge the Legislature to follow suit and include this in the final budget. However, to secure the future of day programs we need an 8.5% increase in the rates at which we are compensated for our services. This would total \$17 million in funding that would help Easterseals NJ provide services to more individuals in the community.

This increase in funding would also help our transportation services continue. We are not reimbursed for the full cost of the transportation we are required to provide individuals. This needs to change as we are facing \$80,000 in additional gas costs between now and the end of our fiscal year in August.

We need everyone to band together and ask their representatives for increases. At Easterseals NJ, we advocate all year round for proper funding to support our program participants and deliver the message that our day programs matter. We encourage people to join [our advocacy network](#) so we can collectively leverage this opportunity and persuade our legislators to do what is right for our most vulnerable citizens.