

JSM Matt Binder Interview 6-12.mp3

Speaker1: [00:00:00] From Press Communications LLC. This is Jersey Shore Matters with Diane de Oliveira.

Speaker2: [00:00:05] Representatives for Easterseals, New Jersey have been meeting with key legislators to ensure the nonprofit will be able to continue receiving support to keep its day habilitation and telehealth programs intact. Hi, I'm Diane de Oliveira. And joining me today is Matt Binder, advocacy manager for Easterseals, New Jersey. Thanks so much for being on the show, Matt.

Speaker3: [00:00:27] Thanks for having me.

Speaker2: [00:00:27] Easterseals is the state's largest disability organization. How many members and their families do you currently serve?

Speaker3: [00:00:35] We serve 4000 people across the state, plus their families.

Speaker2: [00:00:38] That's a lot of people.

Speaker3: [00:00:40] It is. And we're always growing and looking to do more because there's certainly a need.

Speaker2: [00:00:45] So I can imagine how crucial it must be then to have these one on one meetings that you had during the month of May with key lawmakers. How important are Easterseals day habilitation and telehealth programs, especially if you're serving 4000 people?

Speaker3: [00:01:02] They're crucial. You know, they are really a lifeline to those we serve. For those in day habilitation, it provides a lot of socialization, life skills, community integration that they wouldn't get otherwise. And it allows their families to work, get rested. And in particular, these programs were shut down for over a year during COVID. So we've seen a lot of individuals regress and the worst case scenario come to pass. So the rehabilitation has been really, really crucial. Telehealth has been one of the few silver linings of this pandemic for us. It has allowed us to serve

individuals we never would have met otherwise. We've seen no show rates for therapy appointments go way down. We've been able to avoid crises and hospitalizations because we can meet people at their convenience. So it's really a vital that these programs continue into the future.

Speaker2: [00:01:57] Now, which lawmakers did representatives of Easterseals meet with? And what were some of the ideas? I mean, you just mentioned how crucial these programs are. What was their response to what Easterseals is seeking and needs?

Speaker3: [00:02:14] Sure. So we met with about 13 legislators from both parties, and he's continued to meet. And, you know, what we're really talking about is the state budget this year. New Jersey has a record surplus of almost \$10 billion between an unexpected windfall in tax receipts and federal money from COVID relief. And so really talking about fixing some of the insufficiency in the rates we are reimbursed for our services, having a cost of living adjustment going forward, as well as permanently enshrining some things like telehealth or the conversations we've been having. And overall, folks have been receptive. You know, our goal is to really get this across the finish line and make sure, you know, it's written into law.

Speaker2: [00:03:02] How much is Easterseals seeking?

Speaker3: [00:03:05] Sure. So we are seeking a cost of living adjustment of 8.5% across all of our services. That's in line with inflation. We've actually seen costs rise by 12. But, you know, we think 8.5 is what we can get and reasonable. And, you know, the particularly acute need is in debilitation.

Speaker2: [00:03:26] So the overall cost is that \$24 million?

Speaker3: [00:03:30] Yes. For day habilitation, it would be \$24 million. And, you know, as I said, the state has a \$10 billion, you know, excess windfall this year. So we're hoping for a very small portion of the budget to fix this problem for a very vulnerable population.

Speaker2: [00:03:47] Does the response seem like it will be favorable? What how was the feedback from the lawmakers that you met with?

Speaker3: [00:03:54] Sure. So we have heard rumblings that something may be in the works. Our concern is that it will be one off and not permanent. We were very happy to hear that we will be receiving 3% in excess reimbursement. But the negative side of that is that's because there's money left over, because there continue to be about 20% of individuals statewide who are uncomfortable coming back due to the pandemic. And so it really illustrates, you know, the continuing crisis disability providers and the population we serve face.

Speaker2: [00:04:27] Sure. And, you know, it's not just the people that you serve, also the representatives of Easterseals or the volunteers, things like that. Sometimes they don't feel comfortable being in those positions either.

Speaker3: [00:04:42] Absolutely. This is a, you know, community wide issue. And, you know, that's why we're really hoping to, you know, continue to be an omnichannel provider by providing telehealth, you know, as well as virtual services in debilitation. That's something we're working on. We've. You know, really done an excellent job of really meeting people where we are and we hope to be able to continue to do that into the future.

Speaker2: [00:05:06] Now, I was just looking over some information and I see where Easterseals is facing 80,000 in additional gas costs alone. Gas prices in New Jersey, of course, just hit a record high. We've topped \$5 for a gallon of regular and, you know, not including the other cost of inflation. You know how much things have gone up for gas. Does Easterseals provide transportation to its clients?

Speaker3: [00:05:33] Yes, this is a very important point, and thank you for bringing it up. So we are not reimbursed for transportation or gas, despite us having to provide transportation to and from our programs in day of for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. So despite having to maintain vehicles, pay staff, it is not part of, you know, the rate we are accounted for. And so, you know, that is another really crucial piece of this that we hope to solve. And we've had some very positive conversations and we hope a proposal will be forthcoming.

Speaker2: [00:06:12] How many locations does Easterseals have statewide, and is there a need is there a need that's greater in particular areas of the state?

Speaker3: [00:06:20] Sure. So it really is a statewide crisis. You know, we have about 78 facilities statewide. Five of those are physical rehabilitation programs. And as I mentioned, that's really our most acute need right now. The state categorizes people based on their perceived level of disability and we get reimbursed for providing a service based on that. And so for individuals the state considers less disabled, sometimes the, you know, reimbursement doesn't even meet the cost of care. So that's, you know, really the, you know, real crisis right now. And one of our trade organizations, you know, has really termed it keeping the lights on. And that's where we're at. And our big focus right now.

Speaker2: [00:07:06] I just want to remind our listeners, I'm your host of Jersey Shore Matters, Diane de Oliveira, and I'm speaking with Matt Binder. He is the advocacy manager for Easterseals, New Jersey. Last month, representatives of Easterseals met with about a dozen lawmakers to discuss financial needs to keep their day habilitation programs running, as well as their telehealth programs intact. Matt, you know, I know you mentioned a silver lining in the pandemic was being able to do these telehealth visits and programs. What other ways did Easterseals have to adjust during the pandemic? Was it harder or easier? Did you come up with better ways of doing things? And are there things you're still continuing since then? And are things getting better since the pandemic?

Speaker3: [00:07:59] Sure. So, you know, it was a real learning curve. So virtual services, you know, as you mentioned, are the main thing. Telehealth has been a lifeline, being able to meet people in situations like virtual services, you know, if they're not comfortable coming to a day habilitation program or a community inclusion program, you know, they're still able to participate in their community has been huge. You know, really adapting, you know, during the pandemic, you know, our disability service professionals who are really the frontline workers who do the really important work, you know, brought supplies to people's houses. We've continued to, you know, try to adjust and, you know, put in as many safeguards as possible to make people comfortable coming back to our facilities because we serve such a medically vulnerable population.

Speaker2: [00:08:54] Now, are you seeing as far as the mental health aspect, especially with people with disabilities? Did that worsen? Was it about the same or did it get any better? The pandemic we saw has, you know, caused a lot of people who were isolated or just had a hard time dealing with the mental aspect of it. Did you see a difference in that with the services that Easterseals offers?

Speaker3: [00:09:22] Sure. So it really exposed the crisis that was already there. You know, and when people lost their services, they, you know, regressed for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We got a lot of reports of, you know, decreased mood, increasing the amount of supports they needed, loss of interest in doing things like cooking and skills, other skills they had worked very hard to develop. And so returning in person, you know, has been critical. But also, you know, really the veil has been ripped. Off of the. You know, mental health crisis out there. And, you know, we continue to add patients. But, you know, we've been able to do more because of telehealth. You know, individuals who normally are hospitalized during the holidays, which is a tough time for many. We've been able to meet them virtually while they're in crisis and avert that. So we've developed tools to deal with this crisis, but we've also learned just how large it is.

Speaker2: [00:10:29] Yeah. And, you know, it's it's sad because we're hearing just so how many other programs just like yours or nonprofits that are now starting to see, you know, just exactly how bad the mental health crisis is, not just here in New Jersey, but nationwide. As far as other things that you do that Easterseals does. What can people do to help? Do you need more volunteers? How many paid employees do you have? And if people want to get involved in some way, what can they do?

Speaker3: [00:11:04] Absolutely. So we are a truly statewide organization. You can go to Easterseals dot com and you can donate. The big thing you can do for advocacy is write to your legislator, especially during this budget season, and say that disability in the budget matters. You know, if you go to our advocacy page, you will be able to, you know, in basically three simple clicks, write to your legislator and say, this matters to me as a member of the community. And legislators really respond to that. They've consistently said when people, you know, call us or email us and they won't go away, that's when we have to listen. So that is our big need. They can also look out for, you

know, as we go back into the world, events will be having next Thursday will be blue claws night for Easterseals. So we will be there and a portion of the proceeds will go to our organization. So there's a lot you can do to get involved regardless of where you live in the state. And we look forward to working with all of your listeners.

Speaker2: [00:12:03] Matt, when do you expect to have any kind of answer as far as the funding from the state? Have they given you any kind of timeline?

Speaker3: [00:12:12] Sure. So the budget needs to be done by July 1st. And, you know, in the weeks after that, it will trickle out what has come through and what has not. And we may have to look into supplemental funding, but we hope to, you know, in the next couple of months, really have an answer to our immediate needs.

Speaker2: [00:12:29] We have about 2 minutes left. Matt, is there anything that I left out or that you would like to add about Easterseals, New Jersey?

Speaker3: [00:12:36] I would just like to add that we provide a full suite of disability services, mental health, employment to adults throughout the state and that there's a real need. We know that in the Office of Developmental Disabilities alone in the state, there's a waiting list, about 3000 people. And there's just, you know, so much more to do in terms of civil rights, whether it's increasing the Medicaid asset limit so disabled employees can, you know, earn more and keep their benefits, whether it's, you know, planning transportation to include a wider view of disability. So folks with sensory issues are accounted for. There's just really a wide view we need to take and so many more hills to climb. But also so far we've come and I'm really grateful for you having me on to talk about this really pressing issue.

Speaker2: [00:13:32] Matt Binder, advocacy manager for Easterseals, New Jersey, thank you so much and good luck. I hope you get the funding.

Speaker3: [00:13:40] Thank you for having me and have a great day.

Speaker1: [00:13:41] You can hear Jersey Shore Matters with Diane de Oliveira every Sunday morning on Prez Communications, LLC.