

Easterseals Day Program Restarts

By Bob Vosseller

LACEY – After being closed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Easterseals NJ has reopened its Day Habilitation programs statewide, specifically in Lacey, Sayreville
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 and Oakhurst.

Easterseals NJ's Day Habilitation program works with individuals who have an intellectual and/or developmental disabilities to assist them in achieving their life goals. Participants, who must be 21 or older, are taught valuable life skills through instruction and real-world experiences so they can better participate in their community. They focus on social and communications skills, self-care and recreation.

The organization operates five-day Habilitation facilities across the state and has been having a difficult time keeping the programs operating efficiently as a result of overall lack of operational funding, staff members said.

The agency has also been hit with insufficient reimbursement rates, lack of transportation funding or compensation as well as lack of reimbursement for absenteeism.

Sophie Alba who serves as program director at the Lacey Easterseals NJ office spoke to *Jersey Shore Online.com* about what staff, consumers and their parents/caregivers have experienced during the pandemic.

"We closed last March. We did a brief reopening in the fall and then we had to close back down again because the numbers went back up. We just reopened again in May," Alba said.

Alba noted the services that are provided saying, "today they are learning about Fourth of July and our rights and how we got them. Their right to vote specifically and how you would fill out a ballot. It is important for them to know what their rights are.

We do daily living skills, washing, taking care of our area and ourself. We also have recreational activities."

"It is important for them to have different skills, different things that they can do and would like to do. We break it up into different areas. A lesson area and a life skills area. They do community inclusion where they go out into the community. We like to take them shopping so they can follow a grocery list. We also do a lot of health and wellness, exercise. Eating healthy and staying active," she added.

There has been an Easterseals office in Lacey for over 20 years.

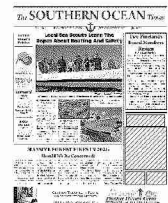
Alba said the pandemic had its toll on those who they serve. "A lot of them were literally in their home for the past year. I've been getting calls non stop about them needing to get back as it is so important for them to have social interaction and getting out. They all tell me how happy they are to be back here.

"It has been hard. Some people are just coming back, they worked here prior," Alba said, noting that currently the staff stands at around seven which is less than half the normal number of staff members they had prior to the pandemic.

She noted that workers were not paid during the shutdown. "It is really hard for us to run the program and we want to help them to the best of our ability. We don't get paid when they aren't here. If someone gets sick now and they show any kinds of symptoms they have to stay at home for two weeks and we don't have anything to supplement us for that."

"We have been trying to work out ways to get people out in the community without transportation reimbursement and we do our in-house learning program," Alba said.

If the State budget didn't address the full needs of Easterseals NJ they had discussed ways to preserve programs and staff. Ideas ranged from enacting a supplemental appropriation for an 8% rate increase for Day Habilitation programming which should be approximately \$16 million in state dollars. Another proposed solution would have been to increase reimbursement rates for A, B,



and C-tiered individuals by at least 15% in the next state budget to ensure long term sustainability.

Also considered was the removal of the transportation requirement from the Day Habilitation program rate so service agencies can be reimbursed for this cost and to reimburse programs for holding spaces for absent participants at 33% of the rate that agencies would be able to bill should they have attended.

“The Day Habilitation program is a valuable one - not only to the participant but to their family members and caregivers,” Brian Fitzgerald, CEO of Easterseals NJ said. “All of these individuals rely on the all-day productive and safe program that we as an organization provide to them. We give them a place to go every day, to socialize, to learn new skills.”

Fitzgerald was pleased with the news that the June 30 passage of the state budget included a \$25 million increase in funding for their Day Habilitation and Community Inclusion programs

Agency spokesperson Terese Kelly Greer told *Jersey Shore Online.com* that “this increase is very important for Easterseals NJ overall but specifically for its Day Habilitation program because it get us back on the path to financial sustainability.”

She noted that program was struggling as a result of overall lack of operational funding. In addition to the Day Habilitation funding, the budget also includes \$42 million for increasing Direct Support Professional (DSP) wages and wages for supervisors.

The budget also included funding for:

- the enhanced residential rate; DSP work is not minimum wage work, and this budget recognizes this

- to increase Supported Employment’s reimbursement rate to \$63 per hour.

- Supportive Housing rental subsidies for individuals with mental health challenges (\$5 million in funding) ensuring vulnerable New Jerseyans are included in our state’s recovery in the year ahead.

- the Division of Deaf & Hard of Hearing (\$500,000) for support communication access, equipment distribution, community education and training, and information and referral to continue to help the deaf and hard of hearing individuals find work.

Alba said the consumers’ caretakers “are all excited for them to come back. I am getting calls every day. They need them to get back. This is the only location for Ocean County and at the current time there are at least three open in the state.”



—Photo by Bob Vosseller

Lacey Easterseals NJ Program Director Sophie Alba, left, joins consumer Marion Major of Toms River and direct support staff member Cody Kirk for a recreational activity at the Lacey Easterseals NJ office.