



Easterseals New Jersey holds 2021 Advocacy Weeks in March and April

By TERESE GREER
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New Jersey's largest disabled organization asks legislators to help offset the pandemic's impact on our most vulnerable

East Brunswick, NJ – Easterseals NJ staff and community members virtually met with NJ legislators at the beginning of March, and will again in the beginning of April, to have important and constructive conversations about the issues impacting NJ residents with various disabilities as well as their families and the employees who work within the industry. The organization specifically wanted to connect with NJ legislators on how they can and should positively impact its Day Habilitation and Telehealth programs.

Easterseals NJ's Day Habilitation program works with individuals who have an intellectual and/or developmental disability 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 including social and communications skills, self-care and recreation. Easterseals NJ, which operates five Day Habilitation facilities across the state, is having a difficult time keeping the programs operating efficiently as a result of overall lack of operational funding, insufficient reimbursement rates, lack of transportation funding or compensation as well as lack of reimbursement for absenteeism.

"The Day Habilitation program is a valuable one not only to the participant but to their family members and caregivers," said Brian Fitzgerald, CEO of Easterseals NJ. "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, etc."

Part of the conversation that Easterseals NJ is having during the Advocacy Weeks with the state's key decisionmakers is to consider the following solutions:

- Enact a supplemental appropriation for an 8% rate increase for Day Habilitation programing. Should be approximately \$16M in state dollars.
- Increase reimbursement rates for A, B, and C-tiered individuals by at least 15% in the next state budget to ensure long term sustainability.
- Remove the transportation requirement from the Day Habilitation program rate so service agencies can be reimbursed for this cost.
- Reimburse programs for holding spaces for absent participants at 33% of the rate that agencies would be able to bill should they have attended.
- Offer flexibility for setting rates in more expensive parts of New Jersey to compensate for higher overhead costs incurred by agencies.

The second issue that Easterseals NJ is discussing with legislators is the importance of continuing telehealth services beyond the pandemic. Since Easterseals NJ locations were ordered closed, and in-person services were cut due to the pandemic, the organization was forced to provide a wide range of telehealth and virtual services, including mental health counseling, case management and wellness screenings. In fact, the organization, has conducted more than 7,000 telehealth and virtual appointments and they have seen their "no-show" rate for its CenterPath Wellness program drop 50%. The obvious benefits of telehealth is accessibility for participants, fairness for those on Medicaid and NJ FamilyCare and efficacy.

Easterseals NJ is asking for that telehealth accessibility continue beyond the pandemic and continue for all individuals as it (1) provides guaranteed coverage or availability to services, (2) ensures par parity and protects the health and safety of those needing the services and (3) offers "place of service" or the services on a permanent basis.

About Easterseals NJ

For more than 100 years, Easterseals New Jersey has helped individuals and families with disabilities or special needs live, learn, work and play in their communities with equality, dignity and independence. Annually, over 5,000 people in New Jersey with developmental disabilities receive services in programs designed to help them achieve independence and full community-integration. For more information on Easterseals New Jersey and its statewide disability services, visit <http://www.eastersealsnj.org/>.

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