



Testimony:

*Before the Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the
SFY 2024-2025 Executive Budget Proposal
Topic: Mental Hygiene*

Testimony Submitted by
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February 13, 2024

My name is Stanford J. Perry. I currently serve as Chief Executive Officer of AHRC Nassau and affiliate agencies, Citizens Options Unlimited and Brookville Center for Children's Services. These agencies offer a lifetime of support to people with developmental disabilities and their families on Long Island.

In addition to leading one of the largest networks of disability services agencies in New York State, I also serve as Chair of the Board of Managers at Care Design New York, a care coordination organization; Second Vice President of the National Conference of Executives for The Arc of the United States; Past Chair of the New York State Industries for the Disabled, Inc. (NYSID) focused on disability employment; and Co-Chair of The Arc New York's Diversity Equity & Inclusion (DEI) Committee advancing a statewide DEI Strategic Plan.

For more than 30 years, I have been proud to dedicate my career to nonprofit disability services and being a strategic part of their advancement. AHRC Nassau and Citizens Options Unlimited operate with the sector's highest markers of excellence: achieving a Compass agency designation through New York State's Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD). Both agencies also hold the Person-Centered Excellence Accreditation With Distinction by an international accrediting body, The Council on Quality and Leadership.

AHRC Nassau was the only disability service provider in New York State named by Forbes in 2023 as one of "America's Best-in-State Employers."

I'm writing to you as an employer who has made the most of the limited resources provided. I can confidently share that the Direct Support Professional (DSP) staffing crisis is not only a funding issue. It's a funding issue intertwined with issues of cultural competency and the pressures of a system operating with no relief in sight.

The 1.5% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) proposed by Governor Hochul is an acknowledgment of a long-underrecognized sector. Following a decade with no increased funding, small and ad hoc allocations are appreciated, however do not instill confidence in the long-term sustainability of the direct care workforce. For this budget year, a 3.2% COLA and Direct Support Wage Enhancement (DSWE) are seen as the minimal bases of support needed for providers to respond to inflation and increasing market demands.

The staffing crisis underway is a life-or-death proposition for the most medically frail we serve, but also an ongoing civil rights issue for self-advocates seeking to fully experience New York as active, involved citizens. The experiences of people with developmental disabilities are not a monolith – however the funding that goes to support them by and large has been inconsistent and structured in a way that fails providers and consequently some of the most vulnerable New Yorkers.

State-run disability programs offer a higher wage than voluntary service providers. Both provide the same public benefit and this issue is compounded when you consider that “nonprofit disability service providers generated \$14.3 billion in economic output in New York State,” according to a Rockefeller Institute of Government 2021 report¹. Nonprofit disability service providers are making meaningful contributions advancing state public benefit objectives – at the very least New York State should not penalize nonprofit employers by treating staff recruitment as a zero-sum game.

I began my career as a Direct Support Professional at the United Cerebral Palsy Association of Western New York. At that time, there was still hope and momentum in New York State’s “buy-in.” It was not too long after group homes were established in New York State. Through this role, I experienced the profound impact one person can have on the life of a person with disabilities and how it radiates outward – to the lives of their loved ones who can confidently pursue their own goals. This is the joy of DSP service.

However, a missing element in many policy conversations around DSP service is cultural competency and the complicated experience of being an advocate for oneself and others. AHRC’s direct support staff are predominantly people of color who work in Nassau County, one of the United States’ most segregated counties serving 1.2–1.6 million residents². Every day, staff cross color lines and report issues of unconscious bias and outright racism over the course of their workday.

Imagine the challenge of facing these issues, then also having to confront issues of ableism and inclusion for people with disabilities. This scenario

¹ Rockefeller Institute of Government, “The Role of Disability Service Providers in the New York State Economy,” Dec. 13, 2021, <https://rockinst.org/issue-area/the-role-of-disability-service-providers-in-the-new-york-state-economy>. Accessed on Feb. 13, 2024.

² Winslow, C. “Dividing Lines, Visible and Invisible: Segregation of blacks, whites built into the history of Long Island,” Nov 17, 2019, [Long Island Divided: Segregation of blacks, whites was built into the history of LI and persists today - Newsday](https://www.newsday.com/story/2019/11/17/long-island-divided-segregation-of-blacks-whites-was-built-into-the-history-of-li-and-persists-today/). Accessed Feb. 9, 2024.

becomes even more difficult when considering staff are often unable to meet their own financial goals and told their profession merits wages on par with retail and fast-food establishments.

In town hall meetings, I am always asked by distressed DSPs about increasing wages and met with exasperation and disbelief when I explain how funding is set by New York State. At the management level, explaining the back-and-forth game of rate rebasing versus new rate methodologies is also met with utter frustration and questions of “What can we do for this funding issue to be resolved?”

While I raise these funding questions to you, I can also offer some practical solutions for some of the ongoing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging (DEIB) issues. The September DSP vacancy rate at AHRC was 17.7% on par with other Arc New York chapters.³ Within the first 180 days of employment, AHRC’s turnover rate of new DSP hires is only 27%. I would attribute this success to an evidence-based DEI framework led by a DEI Officer over the past year as well as our commitment to the E-Badge Academy promoting DSP certifications in partnership with New York State’s Office for People With Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) and the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP).

In the current climate, DEIB is mission critical for preparing staff to meet challenges in the short and long term. AHRC’s DEI Officer directs inclusive management practices with a focus on reviewing staff demographics for fair representation, opportunities to develop and institutionalize cultural competency (such as in job requirements), as well as leading a multi-year DEI Strategic Plan with staff across the organization. DEIB initiatives also celebrate staff’s respective backgrounds and differences. Staff Appreciation Day festivals host thousands of employees and reflect a joyful appreciation of diverse backgrounds with fellowship, food, and activities. Traditional trainings and conversation hours have helped move the needle and demonstrate to staff the agency’s appreciation for all they bring to the job — and our continued support on social justice issues impacting our shared communities.

AHRC is proudly partnering with New York State to bring attention to these best practices. The Council on Developmental Disabilities chose AHRC for a \$750,000 grant to lead the development of a DEI “participatory leaning

³ The Arc New York, “Tell Legislators: Invest in the Workforce and System of Supports for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities,” [Tell Legislators: Invest in the Workforce and System of Supports for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities \(p2a.co\)](https://www.p2a.co). Accessed Feb. 9, 2024.

process” to assist in deepening “belonging” through trainings centered on New Yorkers with developmental disabilities, their families, direct care providers, and staff working in the sector.

This partnership with New York State continues to grow. On Feb. 6, 2024, AHRC Nassau celebrated Tiajuana Gardner, the 1,000th DSP, to receive E-Badge Academy certification through OPWDD and the NADSP. Commissioner Neifeld and NADSP CEO Joe Macbeth were present for Tiajuana’s recognition, along with a DSP cohort honored for their ongoing professional development through the E-Badge Academy.

The DEIB initiatives and E-Badge Academy respond to some of the issues pertaining to belonging and recognition impacting the retention of Direct Support Professionals. The question of how to make the funding for these roles reflect the valued outcomes that they create remains.

I thank the Committee for considering my testimony and would appreciate the opportunity to offer further insight on how the SFY 2024-2025 Executive Budget Proposal might better meet the needs of voluntary service providers and the DSP workforce.