

DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL ALLIANCE OF NEW YORK STATE

Promoting valued lives for the people we serve by advancing the profession of direct support.



**Testimony of Theresa Laws
Direct Support Professional, ARC of Rensselaer County
Member, Direct Support Professional Alliance of New York State**

**Before the March 2, 2011 Joint Legislative Public Hearing
On the 2011-2012 Executive Budget Proposal**

Chairmen DeFrancisco, McDonald, Farrell and Ortiz; members of the Senate Finance and Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Committees; and members of the Assembly Ways and Means and Mental Health Committees; thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on the proposed Executive Budget for New York State as it relates to mental hygiene services.

My name is Theresa Laws. I am a Direct Support Professional with the ARC of Rensselaer County which supports more than 700 individuals with developmental disabilities and their families. I work in one of our agency's 75 residential settings, supporting six people who live there and who, like tens of thousands of other New Yorkers with developmental disabilities, require assistance 24-hours a day, seven-days a week.

I am also a member of the Board of Directors of the Direct Support Professional Alliance of New York State, or DSPANYS as we call it. DSPANYS is the New York State Chapter of the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals. We are dedicated to improving the quality of services for people with disabilities by promoting the profession of direct support, adherence to a national code of ethics, and competency-based training programs. It is on DSPANYS' behalf that I am here today.

DSPANYS realizes that New York State, like families everywhere, must take stock of its income and expenses, balance its checkbook and live within its means. That task, given the current economic situation, requires belt tightening and sacrifices; the proposed budget reflects that. As such, I am not here to describe the plight of underpaid direct support staff who often work two jobs to make ends meet, although that is still a reality made worse by this economic crisis. Nor am I here to advocate for salary increases, cost of living adjustments or trend factors which would improve our lot. I realize the budget situation is too bleak for that.

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With most of the fat already trimmed from services through past cost savings efforts, I am here to implore that the budget isn't balanced on the backs of direct support professionals through lay-offs or salary reductions. I'm here to urge that you look closely at expenditures that do not directly support individuals with disabilities – such as:

- excessive salaries and compensation packages for agency executives and administrators;
- the high cost of maintaining brick and mortar structures that tend to segregate people with disabilities from their community - such as developmental centers;
- expensive yet duplicative administrative processes among agencies doing the same job but located just blocks or miles apart - such as training activities, personnel functions and other back-office tasks; and
- costly person-hours spent on mere paper-compliance activities.

I ask that you look at these expenditures with an eye toward reinvesting them wisely to ensure constancy in the lives of the people we support. Constancy, in these uncertain times, is a rare and precious commodity which should be held dear.

The budget proposes measures that will alter agencies' operations in many still unknown ways. In so doing, the value of direct support professionals will take on increased significance. We are the ones who will be there on the frontlines, supporting individuals with disabilities, everyday, 24 hours-a-day, no matter what changes may occur in the service delivery system. In addition to providing constancy in the lives of thousands of citizens, we will be the first to know what is working, and what is not, as changes impact the people we support. As quality is determined at the point of contact, and not in some office in Albany, we will be vanguard of quality assurance efforts.

In considering the proposed budget, therefore, it is critical that one keep in mind measures that will ensure the presence of a stable, committed and professional direct support workforce. As desirable as salary increases would be, we know they are not possible at this time. But there are other low cost steps that can be taken to ensure constancy in a professional direct support workforce - steps that are worth their weight in gold.

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First is the training of direct support workers in a set of nationally recognized and validated Community Support Skill Standards. All individuals so trained would bring the same skills to the people they support whether they are working in Buffalo or Long Island, in State operated programs or in the voluntary sector. It would promote universal adherence to a set of person-centered support standards.

Second is the credentialing of individuals who demonstrate competency in the standards. Credentialing is more than a piece of paper. It demands proof of proficiency in meeting the standards. It also means adherence to the National Code of Ethics for Direct Support Professionals. Workers from the Adirondacks to the Finger Lakes, in State ops and voluntary programs, would be guided by the same code of conduct. Credentialing could also serve as the foundation for salary adjustments at that point in time when the fiscal picture allows for such.

New York State does not have to invent this training and credentialing program. It already exists and is offered through the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals. Its minimal costs would be offset by savings achieved by the hundreds of agencies which currently operate a myriad of different staff training and development programs.

Finally, as a direct support professional and a single mother of three who struggles to make ends meet on my salary, I can speak first hand to the value of the Health Care Adjustment Program which was not included in this year's budget proposal. For staff members like me, the health benefits it affords often provide that extra incentive to continue serving the people we support as opposed to finding employment elsewhere in a more lucrative field. I would urge that this program be reinstated as a step in ensuring constancy in the direct support workforce.

In closing, let me say, direct support professionals are vital members of the family of New York. We support our most vulnerable brothers and sisters. Like all families, we know the importance of living within our means. And we recognize the challenges New York faces this year in its attempt to do so.

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As you consider the proposed mental hygiene budget, we respectfully ask that you pay careful attention to identifying ways in which savings can be achieved in areas that do not directly support people with disabilities so that these monies can be reinvested in promoting constancy and quality in their lives.

Thank you.