



WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
TRACEY WALKER
TO THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE REGARDING
THE GOVERNOR'S BUDGET RECOMMENDATION FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF DEVELOPMENTAL
SERVICES
MARCH 6, 2015

Thank you to Senator Bye, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee for permitting me to submit this written testimony on the Governor's budget. I am Tracey Walker, CEO of Journey Found, a nonprofit funded primarily by the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) to provide supports and services to adults with intellectual disabilities in north central and southeastern Connecticut. We employ 224 staff serving 67 people in residential and other programs.

I ask that you restore the budget rescissions that have been annualized and not cut the DDS line items related to the waiting list, new services for school graduates and age outs, residential and day services. I would like to discuss the impact of the proposed cuts to the DDS budget on three levels: as a nonprofit organization, as an employer and as a service provider.

As you know, nonprofits contracting with the state of Connecticut have not seen substantial contractual increases in years and even those received have not kept pace with the increased costs of doing business with the average Cost of Living Adjustment less than 1% for the past 20 years. While these costs are a burden to all, they are of particular burden to agencies like Journey Found providing homes for people. There are heat, utilities, rent, and for group homes maintenance and repair costs. Agencies must front the costs of upkeep on these homes while getting partially reimbursed over ten or more years. Every increase in these types of costs without a related increase in funding represents a loss to direct service available to the people in need. Indeed Connecticut has seen two DDS provider agencies end doing business with the state of Connecticut due to rate decreases, rescissions and proposed future cuts. While all nonprofits do, and should, find raise, the reliance on charitable giving cannot keep pace with the loss represented by lack of increases coupled with actual funding cuts. This is particularly true in the current economy.

Journey Found is a unionized organization and has worked hard to develop a positive working relationship with 1199 as they represent our employees. We are dedicated to treating our staff as we expect them to treat those they serve: as people first. In fact Journey Found was created to save services to people being served by an entity leaving the state successfully preserving services to 51 people and 192 jobs. However, despite our best efforts, our wages lag behind not only state workers but also some of our private provider colleagues as our direct care staff in the residential programs start at \$12/hour. Many of our staff work two and three jobs to make ends meet. Our ability to recruit and retain quality staff is diminishing due to wages that

are primarily governed by increases and rates granted through state contracts. Our current vacancy rate for program positions is over 16%. We offer a rich benefits package but cannot compete with state wages and benefits. Yet we have a large number of staff truly dedicated to those they support as evidenced by the fact that over 35% of employees at Journey Found have worked with the same individuals in the programs for five or more years. Their work is rewarding yet hard. Their compensation is low yet they remain as they genuinely care about the people they support instead of just caring for them

As with our fellow provider agencies, there is not a cushion or ready source of funds for Journey Found to absorb funding cuts. We will need to look at cutting service delivery hours and making tough decisions about which programs can remain open meaning less opportunities for the people we support to live the lives they choose. You and I can decide where we go, with whom we go with and when we go. The more funding that is removed from our programs the more we are removing freedom from the intellectually disabled. Funding cuts mean lack of choice for those supported: loss of choice in who works with them, lack of choice about who they live with and where they live, lack of choice about moving away from home to live an independent adult life, lack of ability to be gainfully employed, lack of ability to attend recreation activities, conduct business and contribute to their community.

Ultimately, the cuts to the DDS budget represent a huge step backward for social justice. For those supported by Journey Found and our fellow providers, these cuts threaten their basic human rights. I believe we need to preserve these rights and I am asking you to support that belief by not allowing the proposed cuts.

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