

Testimony to the Appropriations Committee regarding proposed cuts and changes to the DDS budget

Dear Members, Chairs and Ranking Members of the Appropriations Committee,

I am Andrea Barton Reeves, President and CEO of HARC, Inc., a 65-year old nonprofit founded by parents, dedicated to serving people with intellectual and related disabilities and their families throughout the lifespan. I am here this evening to speak about the people impacted by the proposed budget cuts and funding changes proposed by Governor Malloy.

HARC supports over 2200 participants and their families at virtually every stage of their lives. Literally from birth, families can access services in our Stepping Stones Birth to Three program, find help navigating the special education system through our Family Supports program, enroll their child in our day programs, help find them employment in one of our 34 employment opportunity sites, one of which is here at the LOB, and support them through their retirement years in our Life Enrichment Program. Music, art, recreation, respite can all be found at HARC. Our work is a reflection of our immovable belief that every single person with a disability deserves to live with dignity and inclusion.

We have done our best to deliver the best quality services to all of our participants and families, but the struggle to do so with ever-diminishing resources has been nothing short of epic. The spectre of a 15% cut to our revenue will shut down many of the services we provide and leave families with no options. Our experience at HARC has shown us that at virtually every stage of life, the need for services and supports for people with disabilities and their families far outstrips available resources. We have done our part to help meet that need by running our organization as efficiently as possible so that the state dollars we receive, although inadequate to meet the cost of our services, can serve as many people as possible.

We operate our agency as efficiently as we can and we sacrifice to continue to deliver quality services. Our staff have gone without a pay increase for at least the past eight years. Those who stay work multiple jobs just to earn a living wage. They can make more at Walmart and Target than they can doing the work they love. We closely scrutinize the cost of

every service we purchase, whether it be utilities, food for our group home residents or telephone services, and savings are realized wherever they can be found. We also engage in robust fundraising. Yet more and more, sophisticated donors and funders are asking why the State of Connecticut has its own system for delivering the same services as HARC and similar agencies and why is it that the state is not paying private providers the real cost of doing business. The time has come for Connecticut to embrace the economic reality that a dual system of delivery of services to people with developmental disabilities is unaffordable. We support the proposal that a number of state-run group homes (Community Living Arrangements), be made available for operation by private providers. The State of Connecticut has known at least since 2012, that residential services delivered by private providers is a more cost-effective option that still delivers quality care. With that said, state-run homes made available to the private sector to operate does not mean that the State should enjoy substantial savings at the expense of direct care staff, the very people who are responsible for the lives of the residents. Everyone who delivers quality care to people with disabilities deserves a living wage. We believe that paying a living wage to direct care staff and operating group homes that deliver excellent care are not mutually exclusive. When this Committee considers the proposal to offer the operation of group homes to private providers, we urge you not to lower operating costs at the expense of direct care staff.

Next, we at HARC are quite frankly troubled by the proposal to transfer the administration of residential payments from DDS to the Department of Social Services. First, let me say that there are many fine, hardworking people at DSS. Our families report to us regularly that DSS is challenged in meeting its current responsibilities, particularly in the area of the timely turnaround of redeterminations. Unless new resources are to be devoted to administering DDS residential payments by DSS, it does not seem realistic to expect DSS to take on even more responsibilities in administering payments to private providers, especially for a service as fundamental as residential supports. In addition, there seems to be a fundamental misunderstanding as to how residential services are now paid for. Without providing a lengthy primer here, suffice it to say that characterizing the payment as “grants” is not exactly accurate. Even if one were to concede that the payments are “grants” in the traditional sense, (which we do not), these payments are not adequate to meet all of the costs associated with a group home, particularly capital improvements.

Moving to a fee-for-service model would have to consider the full cost of providing supports in a group home setting, which as currently proposed, it does not.

Another of the Governor's proposals to which we object is the elimination of the \$1,000,000 autism waiver. We serve over 250 children in our Birth to Three program, and the proliferation of children with an autism diagnosis is staggering. Research shows that the earlier a child receives quality intervention services, the better their long term outcomes. It is simply short-sighted to save \$1,000,000 now, only to spend millions more on special education and for some children, possibly juvenile justice and incarceration because of our lack of foresight in investing in children now.

Finally, the proposed \$26 million (minimum) cut to DDS will leave the Department and private provider community in shambles. There are already 2000 people on the residential wait list, over 800 children on the autism wait list and over 7500 people on the adult autism services wait list. Moreover, **human services providers employ FIFTEEN PERCENT OF THE STATE'S WORKING CITIZENS. More cuts to human services is not the answer.**

As you contemplate the many difficult decisions you must make, please remember that every budget line impacts a person. In our case, Richard, who learned to read at 65, or David, who had held the same job for the past 10 years, or Jeffrey, who lives an independent life because he has a place to call home with HARC, are people who would be permanently impacted by any cuts. We worked so hard to move out of the shadows and the shame of treating people with disabilities with little regard. Help us maintain their dignity, their joy, by supporting us in our work.

Thank you for your time this evening.

Respectfully,

Andrea Barton Reeves
President and CEO
HARC, Inc.
Hartford, CT