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of New Jersey

Achieve with us.

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Testimony on the FY2015 Budget
Assembly Budget Committee
Thomas Baffuto, Executive Director, The Arc of New Jersey
March 18, 2014

Good Morning. Thank you, Chairman Schaer and the entire Budget Committee, for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Thomas Baffuto and I am the Executive Director of The Arc of New Jersey. As you know, The Arc of New Jersey is the largest statewide advocacy organization for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. We have 20 affiliated local chapters providing services in all 21 counties in New Jersey. Our mission is to enhance the quality of life of children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families through prevention, empowerment, education and advocacy.

We are very grateful and appreciative that many of the needs of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities were addressed in Governor Christie's proposed budget this year. Funding included in the proposed budget will go a long way toward supporting more than 1,200 individuals with I/DD in the community. The FY15 Budget includes money within the Department of Human Services to assist individuals exiting developmental centers, those in need of services from the Community Waiting List, students aging out of their educational entitlement program and people facing unpredictable emergencies. We are also very pleased with the announced closure dates for North Jersey and Woodbridge Developmental Centers in 2014. We support these closures, and we look forward to the facilities' residents living integrated lives among families and neighbors in the community. We are thankful that money currently being used to maintain these two centers is being reinvested into community supports and services. In terms of residential resources, The Arc of New Jersey endorses the Supportive Housing Association's request for additional rental vouchers, funding for supportive services and capital funding.

As a bit of background, services for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities were recently moved from the Division of Developmental Disabilities to the Children's System of Care. The transition is now complete and the new money in the FY15 Budget will help these children with intellectual and developmental disabilities by way of mobile response, out-of-home treatment and intensive in-home behavior intervention. These services are critical; they are what allow children to stay in the home with their loved ones. We thank the Governor for his commitment to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, of all ages, and their desire to live in the community. The Arc of New Jersey realizes that this funding is the result of years of advocacy from both branches and so we thank the Legislature as well for their dedication to this population and we ask you to **please preserve the funding for these critical services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.**

Though this new infusion of funding will help people waiting for services and waiting for opportunities in the community, it does not address the thousands of individuals currently in

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services. The cost of care, which includes the price of food, utilities and gasoline to name a few, has gone up over the last six years but funding hasn't followed. This is having an impact on the individuals receiving services. The cost of care increase we are requesting is about these individuals. It is also about dedicated staff. A Constitutional Amendment to raise minimum wage passed in the November 2013 Election and as a result the new rate in New Jersey is $8.25 an hour. This presents a new and daunting challenge that makes hiring and retention even more difficult for community providers. At this point, minimum wage is only 17% higher than the starting salary for a direct care staffer. Because future increases are tied to inflation, it won't be long before community providers will be paying employees on par with minimum wage. **That is why a 3% cost of care increase to adequately pay the direct support professionals who care for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities is so vital.**

Think about it this way: Individuals working in fast food establishments make comparable salaries, and in some cases more, than direct support professionals. Unlike in the food service industry, direct support professionals are charged with monitoring complex issues for people with a multitude of variables in their lives. They bathe people, feed people, assist them with bathroom needs, transport them in and out of their home and into the community, and help them function and participate as a member of society. These are extraordinary responsibilities but because of the wage offerings, direct support professionals almost always work multiple jobs to survive. When factoring in job expenses, such as transportation and taxes, working as a direct care staffer is practically financially equivalent to being on Welfare. Is this what we want for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities? Is this how we want to compensate the staff that care for our most vulnerable population? We must create a different culture, a culture in line with the care that our constituents deserve.

Toward that end, we ask the Legislature to fund a 3% cost of care increase in order to adequately pay the direct support professionals who care for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. After six years this can no longer be a suggestion or a request. It has become an absolute requirement. Individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities require services to live in the community, but without a cost of care increase, who will be there to offer those supports?

Thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to testify here today.