

Senate Budget Committee Testimony
Walter Bender, Immediate Past President, The Arc of New Jersey
Wednesday, March 19, 2014

Good morning and thank you Chairman Sarlo and members of the Committee for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Wally Bender and I am the Immediate Past President of The Arc of New Jersey, but first and foremost I am father to Lisa. Lisa is 36 years old and has Down syndrome. She lives at home with my wife and I and she relies on state-funded community provider agencies and the services they offer to lead a rich and fulfilling life.

During my tenure as President, I was constantly contacted by fellow parents and caregivers who depend on community services for their children. These supports allow individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to engage beyond their home and to live a full and integrated life among family, friends and neighbors; that's all any parent wants.

The funding in the proposed FY15 Budget will expand capacity for more than 1,200 individuals with I/DD in the community. It will 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. For families caring for a child with developmental disabilities, there is also funding for mobile response, out-of-home treatment and intensive in-home behavior intervention. These services make it possible for parents to care for a child in the home; it's the kind of help that keeps a family together.

We are very grateful for the Governor's continued commitment to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their desire to live in the community. That is why I ask you, on behalf of Lisa and thousands of families across the State, please support the funding the Governor has put in his proposed budget. It will go a very long way to help people like my daughter who are in need of assistance.

Additionally, I must bring your attention to the cost of care increase and the direct support professionals who care for this population. What is clear in all the conversations I have with fellow families is the need for trained, educated direct care employees. And the only way to hire and retain that kind of staff is to pay them a livable wage. That is why I implore you to include a 3% true cost of care increase in the FY15 Budget, because my wife and I won't always be able to care for Lisa. When that time comes she will need the support of community providers to live a happy life. Parents shouldn't have to distress about our loved ones every time their trusted direct care staffer quits their job because the salary just isn't enough to pay the bills. Keep in mind that this year, with the new minimum wage increase, providers will have to correspondingly raise the salaries they offer in order to attract the right people we want caring for our loved ones when we can't. We ask this Committee to maintain all of the proposed funding and to include a 3% cost of care increase for direct care staff.

Finally, I want to reiterate our thank you to Governor Christie for his support of the North Jersey and Woodbridge Developmental Center closures and the Department of Human Services for all their efforts to address these closures and to transition individuals into new residential settings.

We realize that the funding in the FY15 Budget is the result of years of advocacy from both branches and so we thank the Governor and all the members of the Legislature for their dedication to this population. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you today.