



COVID-19 Crisis in Funding: The Immediate Need for Enhanced IDD Rates

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The COVID-19 crisis has hit multiple areas of the Commonwealth's Health and Human Services system. Rightly so, the emphasis has been on the availability and safety of medical and emergency medical care. Availability of protective equipment, testing, and treatment interventions (e.g., ventilators) have been the primary focus.

There is a population, however, that is at extreme risk through this period – those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) residing in community residences (i.e., group homes). These individuals require 24/7 services from a dedicated workforce (direct service professionals, or DSPs) and the consumers themselves often have behavioral and/or medical complications that make their support that much more difficult during this period.

The low pay available for these DSPs has been well documented and much discussed at the PA legislature through past budget cycles. In this time of crisis, this pay disparity is heightened. We need these professionals more than ever to continue to perform this important work with an extremely vulnerable population. Simply put, every day the DSPs come to work understanding that they could be exposed to the virus and take this back with them to their family and loved ones.

Early in the process the Office of Developmental Programs (ODP) promised IDD providers a rate "enhancement" to recognize the critical and difficult work of the DSPs. Through many meetings ODP noted that assumptions were being reviewed and new rates were pending. Several agencies, desperate to keep the workforce in place, even jumped out and began offering staff increased pay, often referred to as "battle" or "hero" pay.

Now we learn that the promise of enhanced rates has been removed from the table. The exact "behind the scenes" driver of this decision is unclear, other than it is being held at "the governor's office" or "the budget office." The fact that it has disappeared, however, cripples the situation.

It must also be remembered that all these IDD programs are 100% funded by the Commonwealth. There is no cost-shifting or cost-offset ability. Unless additional funding comes from ODP or another Commonwealth resource, there is no money available.

IDD providers are faced with some very difficult and real decisions. How do they continue to incentivize this workforce in the face of such difficult and perilous work? If they unilaterally offer staff increased pay (with no corresponding department increase), how do they keep these residences solvent? How do they cover increased overtime expenses (with community and day programs closed), training, PPE, etc.?

As a community we then need to ask: if these programs go away – what then? Who will support these individuals in need, and where?

We are asking the legislature to immediately and effectively address this issue. The clock is ticking, and decisions need to be made. We ask the legislature to push the administration to fulfill the promise and offer enhanced rates to IDD providers such that they can address this workforce need in a time of crisis.

Finally, this need not be in the form of an overall budget increase. There are several places where these funds can come from. The existing Community Participation Supports (CPS) programs have been largely eliminated during this “community shutdown” and ODP would have a realized savings. Further, funds have come to PA via the increased federal match (FMAP) and federal stimulus funds (“CARES” Act) that were earmarked specifically for such program funding. Yet nothing has happened.

IDD providers were promised this needed funding and acted in good faith, thereby doing whatever they could to keep services going and consumers and staff safe.

We thank you for your swift action in this area. We would be glad to discuss this further and to answer any questions. Thank you.