

Rep. Thomas P. Murt
Testimony to Appropriations Committee
10 March 2016
RE: Human Services Funding

Chairman Adolph, Chairman Markosek, members of the Appropriations Committee, and fellow members in attendance, thank you for providing members the opportunity to come before the committee and offer testimony.

It is no secret that I am an advocate for intellectual disability and autism services among other causes. I come before you today to testify on the grave concern I have for the current well-being and outlook of the intellectual disability and autism service system, and those served within it. I have no doubts that this system is now in crisis.

Pennsylvania's intellectual disability and autism services system was first established by an act of the General Assembly in 1966 and signed into law by Governor Leader. At the time, it was a national model for transitioning individuals with disabilities from institutional settings to community supports and services. When this law was enacted, 13,500 individuals lived in 9 different institutions across Pennsylvania and tens of thousands more went unserved in our communities. The system has come a long way since then. Today, less than 1,000 individuals are living in the 5 remaining institutions and there are more than 50,000 individuals being served by private-sector community organizations.

Over the past 8 years or so, the tremendous progress we have made has been threatened due to our collective neglect of the community-based service model over the institutional model. I believe this has occurred through a misunderstanding by this General Assembly. We have appropriated more money each year believing we are addressing urgent needs but the intellectual disability and autism services system has not seen a true rate increase for the services currently being provided to 50,000 individuals since 2007-2008.

The last time this system had a rate increase, George W. Bush was still our president, and President Obama was just beginning his run for President. Meanwhile, operating costs for health care, other insurances, facilities and homes, services, and other products have continued to climb. The Home Health Market Basket Index – the most closely linked inflationary index for these services, has risen 18% over this time and the General Fund has grown nearly 19% over this time, but there has been no recognition of this in intellectual disability and autism services rate settings. To further compound this underfunding of the system, mid-year rate cuts were imposed in 2011-2012 through a negative rate adjustment which took out over \$100,000,000 (\$100 Million dollars) that has never been recovered – and is hurting the system today. This is not the only component of the intellectual disability and autism services crisis.

The other part of the intellectual disability and autism services crisis is a workforce crisis. This workforce crisis should alarm us all. Right now, PAR, the largest state association of intellectual disability and autism services ID/A service providers, estimates that there are in excess of 3,500 vacant positions in the intellectual disability and autism services workforce. That means more than 10% of the positions for Direct Support Professionals who are required to provide services to individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism are vacant. This situation actually increases costs through payment of overtime and temporary staffing arrangements because these staffing levels must be maintained to comply with state regulations.

The workforce crisis is almost solely caused by the lack of competitive wages being paid to these employees which results in rapid turnover of staff as they seek better wages. In most cases, these Direct Support Professionals have starting wages below that of gas station, fast food, or department store workers and they provide much more critical services.

Without competitive wages, the workforce is never stable and staff turnover breaks critical relationship bonds between these employees and the individuals they serve, which is especially difficult for the thousands of individuals with intellectual disabilities or autism who have difficulty communicating. The wages aren't competitive because the General Assembly hasn't provided for any growth in rates for the intellectual disability and autism services system in 8 years. For people with intellectual disabilities or autism, any quality of life depends on the competency and stability of this workforce. Our collective lack of attention to increased funding of this system and for this workforce, is an injustice to those who are being served and inhibits further, our ability to provide services for those on the waiting list – the citizens in our community who need support the most.

It is with these thoughts and critical points in mind that I come before you to ask you to provide for a 4.7% rate increase for the intellectual disability and autism services system in the 2016-17 budget. Providing services to these individuals is a core function of government. For fifty years, Pennsylvania has provided these services in the most cost-effective manner and in the best manner of care for consumers by providing the services through private providers throughout all of our communities. This is Pennsylvania's longest-running, most successful public-private partnership. Funding is entirely government's responsibility as there is no private insurance funding, and private fundraising is minimal in comparison to the overall funding in the system. We must tend to this system so that it can thrive once again.

Mr. Chairman and members of this committee, I respectfully, but strongly, implore you to begin to address these issues and rebuild the capacity of this system by providing for this necessary rate increase for intellectual disability and autism services in the 2016-2017 budget. Thank you.