

FRIDAY, MAY 10, 2024

FINAL

Proposed \$483M for Pa. residents with intellectual disabilities on topic at McKees Rocks event with DHS

'How we've been doing things is not working, and it is long past time for it to change,' the DHS secretary said



By Hanna Webster, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

More than 2.5 million Pennsylvanians have some sort of disability, 2021 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data show — and the Shapiro administration plans to address that, with nearly half a billion dollars in federal and state funding in its proposed 2024-2025 budget.

The funding, \$483 million in all, would be reserved to support Pennsylvanians with intellectual disabilities, autism and mental illness.

In an effort to garner support for the budget's passage and highlight where exactly that \$483 million would go, state Department of Human Services Secretary Valerie Arkoosh gathered with state politicians, people with intellectual disabilities and caretakers Thursday afternoon at Partners for Quality Inc. in McKees Rocks.

Resources such as in-home nursing, transportation and community living exist, but a cumbersome bureaucratic process and yearslong waitlist is preventing thousands from accessing that care. And those paid to care for this population — called direct support professionals — face [low wages, long hours and high turnover rates](#) at their jobs, leading to a dearth in available services and potentially decreased quality of life for those with disabilities.

(continued)

FRIDAY, MAY 10, 2024

FINAL

Proposed \$483M for Pa. residents with intellectual disabilities on topic at McKees Rocks event with DHS



The slated \$483 million is expected to be a combination of state and federal funds, with \$217 million coming from state tax dollars, and the rest from federal agencies.

Dr. Arkoosh said the goal is for much of the money to translate into higher wages for workers.

“Allegheny Children’s Initiative and Milestone are desperately underfunded,” said Maggie Rothenberger, the CEO of Partners for Quality, the parent organization that oversees those and three other nonprofits that serve the disabled community.

Ms. Rothenberger said the starting hourly salary for a direct care professional who works with this population is \$15–\$17 an hour, or an average of \$650 a week.

“These wages are woefully low for the work that these direct care professionals do,” she said, a job that requires extensive training and oversees the care and wellbeing of another person.

Low pay and childcare expenses are among the reasons that Sandy Ersek, a direct support professional at Partners for Quality’s Citizen Care organization, has heard from some people choosing to move on.

“It’s cheaper to have them stay home and have one spouse working than it is to pay for daycare,” she said. “I’m going to stay in this job, because I’m meant for it.”

(continued)

FRIDAY, MAY 10, 2024

FINAL

Proposed \$483M for Pa. residents with intellectual disabilities on topic at McKees Rocks event with DHS



Tears began to wet Ms. Eserk's cheeks, and her voice shook. "I will make the cuts; I will budget and do without a few things so that my folks can have the support that they deserve."

Claire Knepp, a 21-year-old McCandless resident who has cerebral palsy and uses a walker, has worked with Ms. Eserk for about a year now, receiving help with mobility and getting out into the community.

In addition to advocating for increased accessibility throughout Pittsburgh — her wish list includes more curb cuts on streets, fewer doormats in stores and improved bathroom accessibility — Ms. Knepp has been on an affordable housing waiting list for 18 months.

Ending the adult emergency waiting list in Pennsylvania — which thousands are currently on — is another focus of the nearly half-billion. The money would also be used to change the eligibility system for disability services to free up spots for those needing various services like in-home care, transportation or assistance.

Another focus of the earmarked funding is to end the adult emergency waiting list in Pennsylvania and change the eligibility system for disability services to free up spots for those needing various services like in-home care, transportation or assistance.

The current process involves applying for a waiver and then waiting until a spot opens up. Each county in the commonwealth reserves a certain number of waiver spots, but there are thousands more in need than spots available.

(continued)

FRIDAY, MAY 10, 2024

FINAL

Proposed \$483M for Pa. residents with intellectual disabilities on topic at McKees Rocks event with DHS



“Two thirds of states currently have waiting lists for home- and community-based programs,” said Dr. Arkoosh. “We will be a national leader in this area if we eliminate the waiting list.”

Dr. Arkoosh hopes for bipartisan support in the state legislature for the budget proposal.

“I don’t think there’s an issue that’s less partisan,” she said. She encouraged people at the conference to call on their elected officials to support the proposal. “Support from the General Assembly is essential to make these investments a reality,” she said.

She also encouraged employers throughout the commonwealth to consider hiring people with disabilities — an important agent for reducing stigma.

“So many of these individuals want to work,” she said. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard an employer say, ‘I was really nervous about hiring this employee, and we did have to make some accommodations, but this employee has really enriched our workplace, they’re some of our best employees, and it’s hard to remember what it was like before they were here.’”

Hanna Webster: hwebster@post-gazette.com