

**Featured Commentary**

**Dr. Val Arkoosh: Shapiro’s Proposed Budget Would be Life Changing for People with Disabilities, Caregivers**

This May, I visited Partners For Quality in Pittsburgh, where I had the honor of meeting Claire and her fellow Voices for Change self-advocates. I learned it took Claire, who has a disability, five months to find an employer who would hire her, and she has been on a waiting list for affordable housing for over 18 months. While she is looking forward to a career-planning and goal-setting process with her direct support professional, she wants to find a job she loves, not just any job.

I also heard from other Pittsburgh parents, caregivers, employers and direct support professionals (DSPs) who make sure those with intellectual disabilities and autism (ID/A) are getting the support they need to live everyday lives.

Unfortunately, providing and accessing those supports is not as simple as it should be, and stories like Claire’s are all too common across Pennsylvania. More than 4,500 Pennsylvanians are on an emergency waiting list for ID/A services, including more than 1,000 people in Western Pennsylvania alone. If you talk with anyone who is waiting for services, their family members or service providers in the community, they will tell you waiting puts incredible stress on individuals and families who are responsible for caregiving 24/7. Instead of receiving the right services at the right time, the current ID/A services system is structured to only allow a certain number of people to receive services at any given time.

We must make a change so that every Pennsylvanian with ID/A receives the support they need as soon as they need it to achieve an everyday life with dignity and opportunity.

Gov. Josh Shapiro’s 2024-25 budget proposal can make these changes happen. The proposal includes a \$483 million investment in state and federal funding to support rate increases for providers, which will help raise wages for DSPs, and \$78 million in state and federal funds to serve an additional 1,500 Pennsylvanians over the next year. In addition, DHS is giving ID/A service providers a supplemental payment this month. Providers can use these funds to help their workers including DSPs, supervisors and supports coordinators who show up every day to make inclusive, everyday lives possible for people with ID/A. Shapiro also directed DHS to release program capacity to counties so we are able to provide services to an additional 1,650 Pennsylvanians this year. These investments mark the beginning of a multi-year strategy to fundamentally change the way that Pennsylvania administers ID/A services and finally eliminate the emergency waiting list for these adult services.

This budget proposal has received bipartisan support because it is not a political issue; it’s simply the right thing to do for our fellow Pennsylvanians. With this budget, we can help make sure that DSPs have the support and salary they need to take care of themselves and their families while spending their professional lives caring for others. Most importantly, we can help individuals such as Claire, families and communities thrive. Together, we can and must get this done for people across Pennsylvania.

*Dr. Val Arkoosh is Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services.*



Claire, left, a member of Voices for Change, speaks during Pennsylvania Dept. of Human Services Secretary Dr. Val Arkoosh’s visit to Partners For Quality in Pittsburgh in May. At right is Sandy Ersek, Citizen Care direct support professional.