

**Appropriations Committee
Health Subcommittee
February 24, 2022
Testimony of Tracey Walker**

on:

**House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023
(Department of Developmental Services)**

Greetings Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Tracey Walker and I am the CEO of Journey Found. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the state budget.

Journey Found is a private nonprofit organization providing supports and services for adults with intellectual and other developmental disabilities throughout north central and southeastern Connecticut. The majority of our services are provided in small residential settings providing homes for 2-4 people. We are funded primarily through the Department of Developmental Services (DDS).

First let me thank you for the much-needed wage increase that we received through the Governor's settlement with SEIU 1199. That increase along with the second increase for FY 23 will bring our starting wage up to \$17.25. However, while we have received two significant wage increases, we have not received an increase on the rest of our contract for fourteen (14) years. An increase in these areas is essential to meeting the increased costs of food, household and office supplies, utilities, gas, training, recreation, home maintenance and the infrastructure necessary to service delivery.

Please honor the long-term plan initiated last year to address underfunding of community nonprofits and increase funding this year by an additional \$461 million, or 8% in total for FY23.

This funding is needed now more than ever. As we enter our third year of COVID with all the challenges that has presented our agency and staff, we are also experiencing a workforce crisis of unprecedented magnitude.

Journey Found currently has a 16.69% staff vacancy rate which represents 61.25 open positions or 33 FTEs. During the omicron variant spike, we had an additional 20-25 staff out each week due to COVID. This staffing shortage has caused a revenue loss of over \$400,000 as it has taken us months to fill program vacancies. We can't place people into our homes without the staff to support them. It has also increased our staffing costs by over \$300,000 due to utilizing temp staff (not covered by the DDS wage increase), increased Manager and Direct Support overtime and increased utilization of our own relief/per diem staff. We have had an RN job open for over 7 months and no new applicants in sight. We are not in the position of being able to offer higher wages, hiring bonuses or some of the other incentives offered in the for-profit world. We compete with, and often lose to, the service industry, manufacturing and retail for hiring workers.

This situation is less than ideal for the people we support. People with intellectual disabilities need consistent care provided by people who know them well and who they trust. The staff recruitment environment provides little of this stability and many of our programs have temporary staff in and out as well as staff from other programs covering when they can. We need your help in creating a stable environment for them by providing a stable funding base for the sector.

While we are grateful for the efforts of the Appropriations Committee and Governor Lamont to address wage and funding issues specific to services for the Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities population, not all the funding has been released. There was funding dedicated to a pool of dollars to enhance employee benefits, but to date none of that funding has been disbursed to providers. The total allocation has been reported to be less than half what is needed to meet the needs of all the providers that applied for those funds for health care and/or retirement benefits. The initially negotiated amount was not sufficient and the additional \$15 million in the Governor's budget still is not enough to meet the need.

There are two additional proposals by Governor Lamont from the American Rescue Plan Act for DDS that I ask you to support:

- \$5 million in FY23 for infrastructure improvements for public and privately-owned camps.
- \$5 million in FY23 to provide additional recreational and leisure opportunities to facilitate socialization and connections as the state emerges from the pandemic.

Thank you for your support. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about this testimony. My contact information appears below.

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