# Developmental Disabilities Administration Processes and Staffing

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## Legislative Auditor's conclusion:

The Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) has not analyzed how well key processes serve clients or used best practices to determine case manager staffing levels.

## Key points

- DDA is charged with helping people who have developmental disabilities access services in their community.

- DDA has not systematically analyzed how well its process helps people become clients and access services. Clients say the process can be long and confusing.

- DDA's case management approach prioritizes client assessments and planning over service connection and monitoring.

- DDA lacks adequate procedures, documentation, and quality reviews to ensure its published data is accurate and reliable.

- DDA's approach to determining the appropriate case manager to client ratio is not based on workforce planning best practices.

## Executive summary

In 2022, the Legislature directed the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) to evaluate Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) processes for the following:

- Determining client eligibility.

- Assessing client service needs.

- Ensuring clients can access services.



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- Managing the list of individuals waiting for services.

JLARC also must evaluate how DDA identifies its staffing levels.

## DDA is charged with helping people who have developmental disabilities access services in their community

DDA is a part of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). DDA's responsibilities include helping people who have developmental disabilities access services in their community.

- Services include help with daily tasks, skills training, employment services, community residential facilities, and caregiver respite.

- DDA contracts with third-party providers to provide services.

- State and federal Medicaid funding pay for the services.

As of July 2024, DDA had 58,068 enrolled clients. It had 680 case managers who work directly with clients. There are generally five main steps to becoming a DDA client and receiving services. Both clients and case managers must take specific actions to complete each step. Clients typically have family members or friends act as their representatives and help them through each step.

**Figure 1: JLARC staff identified five main steps to becoming a DDA client and receiving services**



Source: JLARC staff analysis.

## Some clients say the process of becoming a DDA client and receiving services can be long and confusing

JLARC staff contracted with the Institute on Community Integration (ICI) at the University of Minnesota to collect feedback from DDA clients and their representatives. Responses showed some variation in client experience. For example, many were happy with the application process and ability to access services. But others reported challenges like difficulty providing documentation or timeliness of the decision. Many thought the needs assessment was too long and repetitive.

## DDA has not systematically analyzed how well its process helps people become clients and access services

DDA monitors some aspects of the process, such as the number of clients who have not been assessed. However, it does not analyze how well its process performs. For example, it does not know:

- How much time is needed to complete each step.

- How many clients cannot access services.

- How the process varies based on a client's location, demographics, or preferred language.

DDA also has not set relevant goals and does not consistently collect data that would be needed for performance evaluation.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) recommends that states have systems to measure and improve their performance. Washington's Office of Financial Management advises agencies to understand current performance, determine ideal performance, set targets, and monitor progress.

## DDA's case management approach prioritizes client assessments and planning over service connection and monitoring

CMS identifies four aspects of case management:

1. Needs assessment.

2. Planning.

3. Service connection.

4. Service monitoring.

According to case managers, DDA focuses on the needs assessment and planning. For example, case managers must assess each client and update their service plan annually. Clients cannot receive services without the assessment. DDA staff report that case managers' ability to help connect clients to services and monitor their progress is limited to time available after the assessments and planning are done.

Case managers and clients report that service connection may be limited to offering clients a list of providers.

## DDA lacks adequate procedures, documentation, and quality reviews to ensure its published data is accurate and reliable

DDA staff have minimal documentation about how its staff should retrieve information from its client database. New staff have little guidance for creating routine reports, replicating data that was previously published, or fulfilling data requests. This has led to the agency struggling to provide and report accurate data.

Best practices state that agencies should adopt policies and practices to ensure the accuracy and reliability of information they make public. This includes documenting methods and reviewing information before it is distributed. DDA staff report that they are in the process of developing documentation.

## DDA's approach to determining staffing levels is not based on a workforce planning approach

At the Legislature's direction, DDA published a plan to reduce the number of clients each case manager works with on the general caseload from 75 to 35. JLARC staff found that the target ratio of 1 to 35 was based on inaccurate information published in a 2019 report to the Legislature.

Best practice for determining staffing levels is to use a workforce planning approach. It has six steps:

1. Determine how the case manager position aligns with the agency's strategic plans, goals, and resources.

2. Identify ideal process performance (e.g., how long each step should take).

3. Assess current structure and process performance.

4. Analyze the gap between ideal and current performance.

5. Create a workforce plan that specifies the tasks, strategies, and resources needed to achieve ideal performance.

6. Implement and monitor the plan to ensure it achieves the strategic direction.

## Legislative Auditor's recommendations

1. DDA should develop and use performance metrics to evaluate how well its process works for clients and improve timeliness.

2. DDA should implement quality controls to ensure the reliability and accuracy of data used for reporting and performance management.

3. DDA should use a workforce planning approach to determine the number of case managers and other staff it needs.

You can find additional information in the **Recommendations section**.