



Developmental Disabilities in Washington: Increasing Access and Equality

A performance audit report from the Washington State Auditor's Office

Washington provides services to help people with developmental disabilities – such as intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, autism, and other neurological disorders – live safe, healthy, and independent lives. The disabilities are life-long and people often have significant impairments that require daily help and support. The Developmental Disabilities Administration provides services such as housing, medical care, personal care, and job training, either directly or by contracting with businesses.

Those who receive services are generally pleased with their results. However, many receive no services at all.

Most clients live in places that allow them the same opportunities to participate in community activities as individuals without disabilities. When surveyed, they give good marks to the services they receive. Further, Washington's Employment First policy has made it a national leader in employment opportunities for people with developmental disabilities.

However, for those who have asked for help but are waiting for services, life is a struggle. Families we spoke to have experienced financial hardships, psychological and emotional stress, and strain on family relationships.

Washington's challenge is to make more equitable services available to all the eligible people who are asking for them.

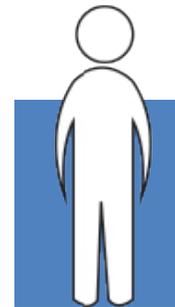
- At present, more than 15,000 people who have applied and are eligible receive no services from the state. Those on the waitlist have been waiting an average of 3.5 years. The Administration cannot prioritize those waiting for services because it does not gather the information needed. Beyond the waitlist, an estimated 46,200 people could receive services but have never requested them, whatever their reasons.
- The 20,500 people the state supports may live in the family home or their own apartment, with others in group homes, or in one of the state's Residential Habilitation Centers (RHCs). Supporting a client at an RHC, however, incurs twice the average cost of the most expensive community-based residential service option, and about ten times the average cost of a client living in their own homes or with family. Even clients with the most complex needs, can be served in the community at a fraction of the cost of RHC care.

Of the 35,150 people who have applied and are eligible for services...

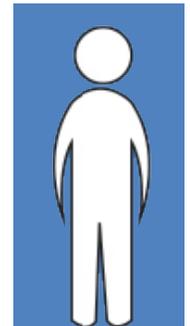
15,100 people
are on the
waitlist



7,800 people
receive partial
services



12,250 people
receive full
services



"A system of haves and have nots is not ok."
--Vancouver parent

"A waiver [for services] is a 'golden ticket.'"
--Spokane client

"People say we are lucky. Services should not be a matter of luck."
--Seattle parent

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- Washington relies on four RHCs to help people who experience crisis, such as the death of a caregiver or a dramatic increase in behavioral challenges. There are virtually no crisis stabilization programs at the community care level near the majority of clients. There is just one community-based crisis stabilization program, in Lakewood, and it serves only children.
- The opportunities available for integrated employment depend largely upon where a person lives.
- Employment programs are administered at the county level: some favor placing individuals in integrated employment settings in the community while others offer more segregated employment options for people with disabilities.

Recommendations

To better balance funding inequities and reduce the waitlist for services, we recommend that:

The Legislature set policy that directs the Developmental Disabilities Administration to develop strategies to maximize using cost-effective service options. Strategies may include:

- Reducing the number of Residential Habilitation Centers.
- Expanding crisis stabilization and emergency respite services in the community, relying less on Residential Habilitation Centers for these services.
- Providing resources to build peer support networks in the community to aid clients and their families with such needs as transportation, respite, and day activities.

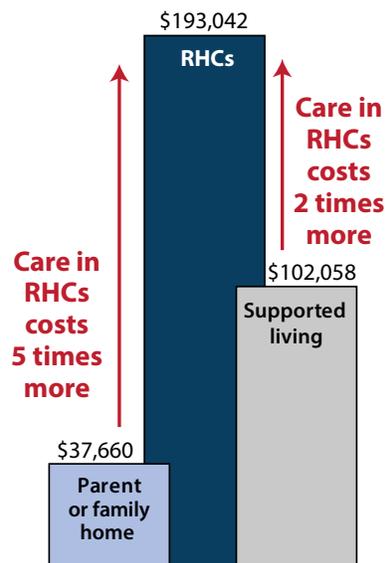
The Legislature set policy to reduce the number of eligible people awaiting services:

- Set targets for how much to reduce the waitlist by when.
- Direct the Administration to develop strategies and a budget proposal for prioritizing the people waiting for services by their needs. The proposal should include funding for case resource managers for people on the waitlist and for collecting information on the services people need, the level of support they require, and how urgent their needs are.

To further improve its employment program, the Administration should:

- Provide financial incentives to counties to encourage equal access to integrated, individual employment for clients regardless of where they live in the state.

People with the most complex needs



Inequities in costs are not solely the result of differences in their support needs related to behavior, medical, or activities of daily living. The chart above illustrates the costs for only people with the most complex support needs.