

TO: Senate Ways & Means Committee

FROM: Lori B. Feldkamp, Big Lakes President & CEO

DATE: March 17, 2021

RE: KDADS Budget – Reimbursement Rates for I/DD Providers

Thank you for the opportunity to express my support restoration of the 5% Medicaid reimbursement rate increase for I/DD providers as a part of the KDADS Budget. In the 2020 legislative session, a 5% increase was approved by the legislature but was cut from the budget during the summer. An increase to Medicaid rates an essential start for sustaining a system of quality supports and services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and effectively addressing the future of IDD services.

For 48 years, Big Lakes has provided services for individuals with intellectual disabilities that enable them to live and work in their communities in Riley, Geary, Pottawatomie and Clay counties. Big Lakes' mission is to deliver quality services that promote choice, independence and inclusion for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

## **I/DD Reimbursement Rates**

The services Big Lakes provides is paid for through the Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) I/DD Medicaid waiver. Medicaid reimbursement rates are determined by the state. While the legislature has appropriated a few small increases over the years, this appreciated action has only just begun to address the severe and chronic underfunding of a system that has been going on for over 20 years. **During that time, staff turnover and vacancy rates have reached dangerous levels and has only worsened with the pandemic.**

## **Why should you care?**

People with disabilities rely on direct support professionals (DSPs) to provide the consistent support they need. **Most individuals with I/DD will need some form of care their entire lives.** The supports provided are as diverse as the people who are served. Those responsibilities can include helping them to obtain and keep a job, providing care when they are sick, assisting them with personal care such as bathing and toileting, helping them budget their money, washing their clothes, fixing their wheelchair, preparing their meals, managing and administering their medications, providing emotional support and guidance and cheering for their success. **DSPs have total responsibility for the health, safety and welfare of the individuals in their care.** In some cases, that support includes staying at the hospital when family is not available or present, taking a punch when a client becomes escalated and cannot control their anger and supporting them in their home through cancer treatments, remission or end of life. In the past two months, we have had multiple quarantines and isolations due to clients testing

positive. Staff were absolutely necessary in order to provide 24/7 care for those sick with COVID-19; placing themselves and their families at risk due to their devotion for the clients.

They are their life coach, teacher, personal trainer, chauffeur, dietician, counselor, physical therapist, occupational therapist, psychologist, nurse and **in some cases, the only family they have.** This is HARD WORK!

## **Workforce Crisis**

**At Big Lakes, starting wage for a DSP is \$11.00 per hour.** HOWEVER, in order to pay that much, we must classify half of our direct support staff as part-time with no paid benefits. We also must limit the hours of individual support our clients receive which results in a high client to staff ratio. All this makes a **very stressful DSP job** even more difficult. It also means high turnover. In the Manhattan area, someone can easily find a job flipping burgers or driving a delivery truck that pays more, has less stress and responsibilities, no night, evening or weekend work and less paperwork and training requirements. This work takes a toll on the emotional health of our staff, especially those that are working 60-80 hours a week because of staff vacancies. **In recent weeks, we were forced to temporarily close two group homes and put the clients in those homes together at our day service center because we have been unable to recruit the necessary overnight awake staff for both homes.**

**There is a workforce crisis for direct support professionals and it is only getting worse.** Finding good quality applicants that are willing to do this work and can meet the minimum requirements, including background checks, drug screening and good driving record is hard. But, finding an individual that is also caring, compassionate and can connect with this population is rare. Unemployment in the Manhattan area has averaged around 3% for many years. The pool of qualified applicants is very small and most qualified people are already employed or receiving unemployment benefits because of the pandemic. Wages and benefits need to be competitive for us to recruit individuals to consider this field as a career. In 2019, our turnover rate was 43%. More disturbing is our vacancy rate. **In 2019, it took on average 140 days to hire one replacement. Today, we have 36 full time equivalent (FTE) positions unfilled.** Those vacancy numbers have escalated in the past seven years and overtime costs are out of control. We do not have qualified applicants for our jobs. **Direct support professionals must be paid a wage that enables them to make I/DD services a career while they support their families.**

**So what does high turnover mean to the people we serve?** There is a carousel of people in and out of their lives and no consistency in care. They can't depend on the same person to be there next week or even the next day. A virtual stranger helping you with the most intimate parts of your daily life. How would this make you feel?

**So what does staff vacancies mean to Big Lakes?** In May, 2016, for the first time in our history, Big Lakes stopped admissions. Individuals that are in crisis or receive waiting list funds cannot access services with Big Lakes. Big Lakes cannot grow and serve people coming off of the waiting list until we can find and retain staff for those already in services. As the legislature considers funding the waiting list, community

capacity and infrastructure issues must be addressed. **The number one capacity issue for I/DD services is the workforce shortage.**

## **Summary**

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities need and deserve services delivered by qualified staff. Direct support professionals need and deserve wage and benefits that values their hard work and compensates them fairly and adequately for those responsibilities. In closing, I want to reiterate any bill or budget addendum that would consistently increase reimbursement rates every year for I/DD HCBS waiver services. Thank you.