

2021 Wrap Up/2022 Line Up January 2022

As the Institute has done for several years, below we take stock of key events impacting the Illinois community service system for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) in 2021 and forecast what's in store for the year ahead. While COVID-related issues and forces impacted and influenced I/DD provider organizations, there were other important developments that will continue to shape the Illinois I/DD landscape into 2022 and beyond.

COVID Impact on Staffing and Program Services

While 2021 began with the promise of a return to normalcy thanks to the development of several vaccination options against COVID-19, the promise was short-lived as society, including I/DD community agencies and the people they support, were forced to return to precautionary measures due to the emergence of the omicron variant. Two notable trends resulting from this were crippling reductions in both direct support staffing levels and Community Day Services participation (CDS).

I/DD organizations, like many other businesses, struggled to recruit and retain hourly staff in the face of apprehension regarding the safety of vaccinations, unprecedented competition for workers, family demands as schools and day care centers remained closed, burn-out and exhaustion from months of live-in arrangements and overtime and extended unemployment benefits that rivaled wages in the I/DD sector. An early 2022 survey of I/DD organizations found a staggering **27% vacancy rate in Direct Support Professional (DSP) positions** with an additional 17% vacancy rate among filled agency positions due to the impact of the omicron variant – I/DD organizations are struggling to provide daily care and support with 41% of essential positions unfilled or incapacitated.

A second major impact of COVID throughout the year has been a decline in attendance at Community Day Services (CDS). Because CDS sites often serve people from a variety of different residences including CILA sites, ICFDDs and family homes, concerns regarding co-mingling, transportation challenges and limited mask and safety protocol tolerance prevented most CDS programs from returning to pre-COVID censuses. Respondents to a statewide survey of I/DD community agencies reported a nearly 50% decline in CDS daily attendance as of January 2022.

As we begin 2022, both these issues, deflated DSP staffing levels and CDS census are expected to continue, with the former clearly being the key challenge and threat facing community agencies.

Wage Pressures

As 2022 begins, payment to I/DD community agencies increased to \$16/hour for average (not starting) DSP wages. Despite this increase, agencies across Illinois are reporting historic-level DSP vacancies and an inability to compete with starting wages for less-demanding employment opportunities. 67 I/DD agencies reported a **net loss of 548 DSPs in 2021** with inability to offer competitive wages as the primary cause of a declining DSP census. The increase to \$16/hour for average (not starting) DSP wages occurred at the same time as statewide minimum wage increased to \$12/hour; raising the bar on all industries for starting wages. The gap between minimum wage and reimbursement for average DSP wages falls well short of the recommended 150% differential recommended by Guidehouse as well as the 93% differential when the CILA program began.

Guidehouse Rate Study

2021 marked the first year the Guidehouse Rate Study recommendations were available to inform the state budget. The extensive study concluded that the infusion of significant fiscal resources was needed to stabilize I/DD community services in Illinois. A central (and indeed the first) recommendation in the rate study was to tie DSP staff wages to a 1.5 factor over minimum wage. The Institute chaired the Staffing Committee that contributed recommendations to the rate study.

With Guidehouse as a basis, FY22 marked the greatest single-year investment in I/DD community services in Illinois history: \$170 million to support partial implementation of Guidehouse Year 1 recommendations. With minimum wage rising to \$12/hour statewide on 1/1/22 (\$15/hour in Chicago), the gap between state reimbursement and the Guidehouse target wage remains substantial. In addition to DSP reimbursement, other areas of the community I/DD system affected by the FY22 budget include employment services, increasing CDS and Children services reimbursement and paying CILA providers for the full number of hours of services rendered.

Looking ahead to the FY23 budget, we know there will be many competing demands for limited state resources. The Institute and other community system stakeholders will remain a strong voice for continued implementation of the Guidehouse recommendations and keeping Illinois on the path toward fully and adequately funding the community I/DD system.

Inability to Accept New People into Services

56% of I/DD community agencies responding to a 2022 survey reported they are suspending or substantially curtailing new admissions to services due to inadequate staffing to expand services. Indeed, organizations are finding themselves considering or implementing a reduction in services or service locations, to conserve limited staffing resources. At a time when demand for smaller settings is increasing, many Illinois residential settings are going in the opposite direction due to inadequate staffing. Countless community organizations report closing and consolidating CILA homes due to staffing, further limiting access to community services for people looking to enter the service system.

Federal Rule Impact on Illinois I/DD Community Organizations

The federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) finalized a rule in 2014 establishing standards for settings where Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) are provided. In Illinois, this includes CILA group homes and Community Day Services sites. Illinois was among the last states to receive approval from CMS for its plan to achieve compliance with the rule which is set to take effect 3/17/23. While other states have been preparing their community systems for the rule since 2014, Illinois' failure to place the same attention on its system means that 2022 will be demanding in terms of the energy and resources community organizations will have to invest in this area; a challenge in the best of times but certainly more so given the circumstances facing I/DD organizations.

The Future

Illinois I/DD community organizations are facing 2022 with unprecedented trepidation: the continuing impact of the worldwide pandemic and the desperate circumstances surrounding recruiting and retaining staff have many veteran I/DD professionals (including this one) feeling like the system is as fragile as they've ever seen it. Looking ahead to 2022 we see challenges, opportunities and most importantly the responsibility to assure that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities supported in the Illinois community system have access to the services, support, and staff they need to maintain their safety, wellbeing and continue to live in community settings. The Institute and our member I/DD organizations are more committed than ever to working in partnership with state and legislative leaders, and stakeholders across Illinois to fulfill that vision.

For a quick review of Institute 2021 highlights, check out: [Institute 2020 Wrap Up](#)

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