

County offers solution to fix Early Intervention crisis

Dinolfo called on to step in

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Monroe County announced Thursday that it had found a way to avoid an unprecedented waiting list for Early Intervention services, even as County Executive Cheryl Dinolfo traveled to Albany in search of emergency state funding. There is a shortage of service coordinators, among other endangered positions in the field of providing developmental services to children under the age of 4. There has been an exodus of service providers in the community and the county's own stable of coordinators are too few to pick up the slack. All parties agree the New York state funding formula is ultimately to blame, but a growing chorus had been calling on the county to free up enough money to fund more service coordinator positions now, even without additional state money. County spokesman Jesse Sleezer instead outlined a solution to the immediate issue that does not require additional funding. About six clerical and administrative workers in the Public Health department will be reassigned to handle the non-specialist portion of the service coordinator job, freeing a portion of coordinators' workloads.

At the same time, six of the current 12 service coordinators will be reassigned to focus on intake rather than managing existing caseloads. Both measures will stay in place as long as necessary, but Sleezer cautioned that it is an "unsustainable solution." "The county has gone above and beyond to find an internal solution to bridge the gap," he said. "The only way to truly solve this crisis permanently is for the state to fix its rate-setting structure."

To that end, Dinolfo traveled to Albany Thursday along with Jeff Kaczorowski, former president of The Children's Agenda, to ask the New York State Association of Counties to adopt Early Intervention as a lobbying priority. She is also directly calling on Gov. Andrew Cuomo to immediately change the rate structure to make it easier for providers to bill for all their labor, and to release emergency funding to boost reimbursement rates for service coordinators as well as direct provision of services.

operate under the same state regulations. If this has been a looming problem why haven't we been asking the state for help?"

She noted that, when state Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli categorized Monroe County as fiscally stressed, Dinolfo responded by saying there was plenty of money in reserve.

"Why aren't we tapping these reserves to protect our children?" she asked. "Let's not forget the reserves belong to the community."

A slate of Early Intervention advocates, including several local pediatricians and affected parents, spoke at a press conference Thursday afternoon, then again before the Legislature's Ways and Means committee.

State needs to raise rates by 40 percent

At issue is the amount that organizations are reimbursed for the services of special education teachers and speech, physical and occupational therapists working with the youngest children. The rates in many cases have decreased over 20 years, even before inflation. A report earlier this year by The Children's Agenda estimated the state would need to increase rates by 40 percent to allow service providers to break even. Gov. Andrew Cuomo in October professed complete ignorance of the problem, while the state Legislature has thus far not taken the topic up as a priority. Dinolfo said it will be the county's top lobbying point this year.

State Sen. Rich Funke, R-Perinton, wrote a letter to Cuomo Nov. 30 urging him to "act immediately to increase reimbursement rates and provide additional funding in your Executive Budget for Early Intervention providers." He also asserted that past budgeted funding increases have been swallowed up by administrative costs in Albany.

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Kaleh

The revocation of the waiting list removes the county from the direct cross hairs of local advocates, who had said it would inevitably run afoul of state regulations regarding when children need to be seen.

Earlier Thursday Monroe County Democrats added their voices to the chorus calling on Dinolfo to act. Minority Leader Cindy Kaleh wrote in a statement: “Monroe County is the only county with an Early Intervention waiting list even though all counties