

disabilityscoop

Disability Service Provider Crisis Worsening, Survey Finds

by Michelle Diamant | October 21, 2022



Disability service providers across the nation are overwhelmingly turning away new referrals, shutting down programs and services and struggling to maintain standards and there's no relief in sight.

Findings released this month from a survey of 718 organizations serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities nationally show that providers are continuing to shrink more than two years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic set the beleaguered sector into a tailspin.

Of the providers surveyed, 83% said they are turning away new referrals, 63% indicated that they have discontinued programs and services and more than half said they're considering further closures. Nearly all respondents said they've had trouble achieving quality standards.

This is the third year that the American Network of Community Options and Resources, or ANCOR — which represents disability service providers across the nation — has fielded the survey. The latest one was conducted during a four-week period beginning in August.

Since the start of the pandemic, ANCOR has found that the number of organizations closing programs and services has grown by 85% and the share of providers denying new referrals has increased by a quarter.

Staffing troubles are largely to blame for the difficulties facing providers, ANCOR said, with many people shunning low wage, challenging direct support professional positions in favor of higher pay at fast food restaurants, retail establishments and elsewhere.

And the problems are only expected to get worse. The survey found that 66% of providers anticipate more vacancies and higher turnover when COVID-19 relief funding runs out and other regulatory flexibilities associated with the public health emergency end.

The findings come just months after Congress failed to move forward despite more than a year of negotiation on an ambitious Biden administration plan to invest \$400 billion to reinvigorate the nation's home and community-based services system.

The consequences are varied and severe for people with disabilities and their families, advocates say, with those currently on waiting lists for services likely to languish longer and individuals who theoretically have access to Medicaid-funded supports struggling to find providers or experiencing service disruptions.

“It could be anything from being forced to move to a new home if two or more group homes are being consolidated to having nowhere to go during the day because a day program has been shuttered,” said Sean Luechtefeld, senior director for communications at ANCOR. “We hear gut-wrenching stories like this all the time. We’ve heard of people sleeping in their wheelchairs because they didn’t have a DSP to get them out of their bed in the morning, people being dropped off at the hospital because their DSP couldn’t work any longer but didn’t have anywhere to go, and more. These examples are not indicative of everyone’s experiences, but they’re not uncommon and will continue becoming more common unless decisive legislative action is taken.”