



OPINION

## Budget constraints would hit Californians with developmental disabilities hard



BY **AMY WESTLING** POSTED 02.27.2024

OPINION – California’s tax revenue continues to fall short of initial forecasts, with a [current budget deficit of \\$73 billion](https://calmatters.org/politics/capitol/2024/02/california-budget-deficit-balloons/) (<https://calmatters.org/politics/capitol/2024/02/california-budget-deficit-balloons/>), and further expected shortfalls that could very likely result in even more spending cuts, additional delays, and deferrals.

As policymakers and the Administration continue to identify opportunities for General Fund savings that would be least harmful to those supported by social services programs, the current fiscal reality does not bode well for California’s regional center system and the over 430,000 individuals with developmental disabilities it serves. In fact, a shocking \$1 billion dollar loss for the system is looming in the Governor’s recently-released proposed budget.

While we understand creative solutions are necessary to pull California out of this situation, and we're not the only community that could be hit hard with cuts and delays, the reality is that our state's most vulnerable population is at risk. It's critical policymakers and the Administration take a closer look at what programs and services they are considering and how those served would be impacted.

To help us weather this daunting deficit storm, we must learn from the past, support the needs of today, and plan for tomorrow and beyond. This is a comprehensive problem that requires a collective solution with the lightest possible impacts.

To learn from the past, we can turn to the Great Recession, when California froze, and then cut, service provider rates. Over a decade later, our system is still recovering from this. The Association of Regional Center Agencies (<https://www.arcanet.org/>) (ARCA) joins community stakeholders, including its partners in the Lanterman Coalition (<https://thelantermancoalition.org/>), in opposing any delay of the final provider rate increases.

Starting in 2016, California policymakers began making unprecedented investments in the developmental services system, righting the wrongs of decades of neglect. We cannot abandon these ongoing investments. These major advances in equity and service capacity require a continued commitment to achieve their intended purpose.

This already-agreed-to increase aligns rates with 2022 expenses. Labor cost pressures, including from fast food and health care facility minimum wages, make it impossible to wind back the clock to this date without causing significant harm to the service system hundreds of thousands of Californians rely upon. This proposal would result in the overall loss of \$1 billion in anticipated funding, including \$400 million from federal sources. Service access, utilization, stability, and choice would all decline, eroding much of the progress made in these areas over recent years.

It's not enough to just hold the line on funding. Our population continues to grow. Applying old funding levels to new people degrades service availability for everyone.

Additionally, the Governor laid out plans in his January Budget for the development of a Master Plan for Developmental Services (<https://www.chhs.ca.gov/home/master-plan-for-developmental-services/>) to “outline shared goals of developing a system that is person-centered, equity focused, and data-driven while maximizing the effectiveness of recent investments to improve outcomes for consumers.” While ARCA welcomes closely examining California's developmental services system and planning for its ongoing future evolution and success, the state must commit to the following principles:

1. The preservation of the entitlement to needed services and supports as defined in the Lanterman Act and clarified in the ruling of *ARC v. DDS* (1985);
2. Ensuring the equitable availability, including along racial, ethnic, geographic, socioeconomic, and linguistic lines, of flexible and sustainable services needed to help individuals achieve person-centered

outcomes;

3. Alignment of policies and available supports with the commitment to California's Employment First Policy;
4. Supporting community inclusion and participation, including through efficient access to generic services and specialty supports such as accessible transportation;
5. Leveraging innovative technology to improve the lives of people served by regional centers; and,
6. Proactively preparing for the changing service needs of people served across their lifespans taking into account changing diagnostic and demographic trends.

ARCA proposes we collectively learn from past experience, prioritize funding key policies, and look towards the future. Above all else, we must not stray from the state's commitment to the nation's only true entitlement for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families, as this is the foundation of California's developmental services system and the promise of the Lanterman Act ([https://lanterman.org/lanterman\\_act](https://lanterman.org/lanterman_act)).

Sustained funding and long-term investments remain critical to serving Californians with developmental disabilities. We urge policymakers and the Administration to not cast aside the progress made for Californians with developmental disabilities.

*Amy Westling is the Executive Director of the Association of Regional Centers (ARCA)*

Want to see more stories like this? Sign up for **The Roundup**, the free daily newsletter about California politics from the editors of Capitol Weekly. Stay up to date on the news you *need* to know.

Sign up below, then look for a confirmation email in your inbox.

**SIGN UP »**