

Connecticut State Report 2019

By John Hirschauer

Connecticut's Governor Ned Lamont won the 2018 gubernatorial election and replaces former Governor Dannel Malloy. He inherits a state with significant budgetary and fiscal issues.

Considering the financial status of the state of Connecticut, virtually all DDS stakeholders were satisfied with Governor Lamont's proposed budget for the 2020-21 fiscal year. No cuts were proposed for the department, and DDS Commissioner Jordan Scheff testified in favor of the budget proposal. Leaders from the Arc Connecticut and other anti-congregate nonprofits provided favorable, if qualified, testimony.

The budget calls for the closure of one cottage at the state's largest ICF/IID, Southbury Training School (STS). This would reduce the number of active residential cottages from 11 to 10. Other cottages and buildings remain active on grounds for day programs and on-campus medical services. This is a modest victory for the facility, particularly considering the continued militancy with which its opponents demand its outright closure. Through resident deaths and transfers, STS' population has decreased from last year's census of 201 to 175 as of June 2, 2019.

The Home and School Association of the Southbury Training School, an advocacy group of family members of Southbury residents, engaged the services of Board member John Hirschauer to advocate on their behalf in the legislature for the 18-19 session. John is a former resident of the town of Southbury and a long-time volunteer at STS. No formal motions have been made to close Southbury since last year's report, though the "Closure 2020" group, which seeks to close STS and the remaining regional centers by 2020, continues its advocacy, in tandem with allied non-profit organizations. The floated idea of new admissions at Southbury has been met with predictable scorn by anti-congregate activists, though no formal action has been taken in that regard. Some legislators have publicly or privately expressed their sympathy for the need for a facility like Southbury in the broader continuum of care options. Sentiment towards closure is at least mixed; legislators on both sides of the question seem to have realized the significant expense involved in a closure project. The focus of the disagreement seems to be philosophical rather than economic.

Three regional centers - Lower Fairfield Regional Center, Hartford Regional Center, and Northwest Regional Center - remain active in the state, with the three centers combining to serve approximately 150 clients, per DDS' website. Regional center clients, as is the case in most other states in which they remain active, typically serve difficult-to-place individuals with I/DD. A "Step Up/Step Down unit" at the Hartford Regional Center campus was approved as part of the Governor's new budget. The unit has since been completed and is ready to open. Lower Fairfield Regional Center also offers respite services.

The implementation of wage increases for service providers that were enacted last year has gone relatively smoothly, with a few areas of confusion surrounding the eligibility of various employees. Wages for DSPs in CT now start at \$14.75 per hour. However, there is still a shortage of Direct Support Professionals in Connecticut. According to the online employment service indeed.com, there are nearly 2,700 openings throughout the state.

Legislatively, the most momentous bill being pursued is a revision of the state's level of need (LON) criteria, with a particular focus on behavioral complexities. The Arc of Connecticut and its allied non-profits have spent predictable energy attempting to defeat this worthwhile legislation.