



***Testimony before the Appropriations and Human Services Committees
Autism Waiver
Commissioner Deidre S. Gifford, MD, MPH
September 21, 2022***

Good morning Senators Moore, Osten, Berthel and Miner, Representatives Abercrombie, Walker, Case and France, and distinguished members of the Human Services and Appropriations committees. My name is Deidre S. Gifford, and I am the Commissioner of the Department of Social Services (DSS).

We are here today to seek your support to renew the Department’s autism waiver. The effective date of this renewal is January 1, 2023.

The Department would like to begin by emphasizing our commitment to individuals served by the autism waiver, as well as their family members and identified representatives, in ensuring access to high quality and cost-effective services.

The Department of Social Services’ waiver for persons with autism provides home and community-based services to individuals with autism who do not have an intellectual disability (a full IQ score of 70 or higher). To qualify, an individual must have substantial limitations in two or more of the following major life activities: (1) self-care, (2) understanding and use of language, (3) learning, (4) mobility, (5) self-direction, or (6) capacity for independent living. These functional impairments must have been diagnosed before age 22 and be expected to continue indefinitely.

Currently, the waiver serves 170 individuals. The current waiting list for services is 1,996. The average annual cost per waiver participant is \$19,406, with an expenditure cap of \$50,000.

A Notice of Intent (NOI) for the renewal of the waiver was posted for public review and comment in the Connecticut Law Journal, as well as the Department of Social Services’ website, beginning July 26, 2022, for a period of 30 days. There were four comments submitted in response to the NOI.

One comment was in support of the changes. The others included requests that the Department add a new service, supported employment, and keep the current individual cost cap intact. Adding supported employment would have cost an additional \$1.6 million (gross) which had not been budgeted. In order to accommodate this cost, we would have needed to reduce the number of individuals being served. We opted instead to serve more individuals with the array of services that are already in place. I also want to assure the committees that the proposed changes to the waiver do not in any way modify the individual cost cap of \$50,000 per year.

For this renewal, the most significant change is the addition of nutrition as a service. The service permits: the clinical assessment and development of special diets; positioning techniques for eating; recommendations for adaptive equipment for eating and counseling for dietary needs related to medical diagnosis for participants; and training for paid support staff to ensure compliance with the participant's dietary needs. These services are not covered in the Medicaid State Plan and thus are not available except through this service addition. This service is limited to 25 hours of service per year and requires prior authorization from the individual's case manager. This service was added to address the needs of our waiver participants in making healthy choices, especially those who have diabetes and other chronic health conditions.

The amendment will also adjust the maximum total number of participants. The waiver was expanded legislatively to add 50 slots beginning July 1, 2021, and an additional 150 slots beginning July 1, 2022. Further, the renewal will amend the service definitions of social skills groups, life skills coach and clinical behavioral support services to permit these services to be provided by alternate means beyond face-to-face, including virtually. The alternate means of service delivery is currently permitted for life skills coaching services on a temporary basis pursuant to an Appendix K Emergency Preparedness and Response Amendment, however the authority will expire six months after the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency.

Lastly, the waiver seeks to amend the qualifications for individual and agency providers of life skills coaching. The amendment removes the requirements that providers have a bachelor's degree and pass competency tests for autism program orientation training level 1 and 2 within three months of working with an individual. The qualifications have been updated to include the requirement that providers have a high school diploma or equivalent and have experience with those on the autism spectrum.

Technical updates in the waiver include updated participation and service utilization calculations.

DSS respectfully requests that the committees approve the request to renew the autism waiver. I welcome your comments and questions.