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## **Billie Rheam: Keep fighting for the developmentally disabled (Opinion)**

By Billie Rheam  
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We residents of the Eastern Panhandle are fortunate to be represented by forward-thinking state legislators who care about people with developmental disabilities.

Senate President Craig Blair, R-Berkeley, showed compassion and fiscal sense in fighting for a study of the state’s Medicaid waiver for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities — the IDD waiver.

Blair helped push through legislation introduced last year by his colleagues from the Eastern Panhandle, Sen. Jason Barrett, R-Berkeley, and Delegate Paul Espinosa, R-Jefferson, to examine what the Medicaid system pays providers of IDD services.



Delegate Michael Hite, R-Berkeley, a provider, has been able to tell his colleagues firsthand about the financial challenges. IDD services range from case management and personal care to residential services in group homes. The study, presented in December, found that the system is underfunded by the state, so it's no surprise providers are struggling to survive.

Rates are based on a complicated formula and have had no significant increase for 12 years, but during that time the cost of providing those services has increased drastically. Inflation has risen rapidly, and the cost of living in the Eastern Panhandle is higher than in much of West Virginia. Without an adequate rate increase, group homes have been closing their doors, and those that remain cannot afford to take in new residents, even when they have empty beds.

Eastern Panhandle lawmakers realize increasing rates for community-based providers is essential for keeping the whole statewide system of IDD waiver services from collapsing. They understand that if the system collapses — if providers close group homes, in particular — many of the 1,200-plus residents of these homes have nowhere else to go. Caring for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities is a state responsibility, and West Virginia would be required to care for folks with no family to go back to.

We are talking about folks like “Jim” (not his real name), a man who loves the Mountaineers, loves to go shopping and likes community outings like the State Fair. At 55 years old, Jim has lived in enCircle’s Stonebrook Group Homes for 31 years because of his developmental disabilities. He came to us as part of the Medley consent decree that closed state institutions, including Weston State Hospital, where he lived, and moved residents into community-based care.

Jim's disabilities exist through no fault of his own, yet he is totally dependent on the care of others. He needs assistance with all his daily living tasks and, because of his medical condition, has days when he cannot walk without support. He does not have family that could care for him if he did not live in a group home.

Our fiscally conservative legislators understand that it costs the state much less to care for people with disabilities in our communities than it does in state institutions. If group homes go out of business, the state's only option likely would be the state psychiatric hospitals, which are already full, not appropriate for the IDD population, and expensive — to the tune of \$900 per person per day. West Virginia is much better off providing appropriate funding for appropriate services.

I urge the entire Eastern Panhandle delegation to fight for a budget amendment that will fund the recommendations that came out of last year's study of the Medicaid IDD waiver. Jim and the thousands of other West Virginians in his shoes don't deserve to be sent back to institutions. And West Virginia taxpayers shouldn't have to pay for the most expensive option.

Let's continue to fight for great services for people on the IDD waiver and good stewardship of our tax dollars.

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