

Is the problem money or lack of caretakers? Eriech Tapia wrote [a story for News OK](#) explaining that although Developmental Disability services might be cut, the real problem is that there are not enough people wanting to become caretakers. The following story explains more.

People who work in the Department of Human Services' Developmental Disability Services department take care of more than 5,500 disabled in the state, while managing a waiting list for services that continues to grow and a labor shortage among providers due to low pay.

Possible cuts could also jeopardize the 7,548 people who are on a more than 10-year waiting list to receive benefits through a program administered through DHS called the Medicaid Home and Community Services Waiver. It's a federally funded program that requires the state to pay between 20 and 40 percent of its total budget.

Cuts also could hurt the 1,200 people who receive state-funded benefits through the Department of Human Services' Developmental Disabilities Services department. The program is funded by about 60 percent from Medicaid and 40 percent from the state.

"It is a major concern for us," said Marie Moore, interim director of the Developmental Disabilities Services at DHS.

The DDS department is facing budget cuts that could range from \$3.9 million to reduce services to \$11.8 million to eliminate services, creating a ripple effect among partner nonprofits that contract with DHS who could lose some or all of their employees.

"We are having difficulties, as it is, finding employees to work at the wages we pay due to the insufficient reimbursement rates," said Lara Morrison. Overseeing a home with three people who are immobile, Shantene Gordon has worked with the nonprofit for more than 14 years and is paid \$10.50 per hour as a home supervisor, working upward of 48 hours a week.

A regular caretaker in a home is paid a maximum of \$8.50 per hour, which could mean living in poverty for a parent supporting two children, she said.

"If you get somebody that sticks around for years in this job, you are doing lucky because a lot of the time people just come in, get trained and they are gone," Gordon said.

Gordon blames the state and federal governments for neglecting to adequately fund Developmental Disability Services at DHS.

Reimbursement from DHS pays for staff, transportation and therapy. The cost of room and board is paid by a resident's Social Security income.

"We are a bare-bones employer," Morrison said. Less than 1 percent of her staff are administrators.

Further cuts could force Morrison to scale back on services to individuals in homes across the state, but she said that forcing people over to private-pay options would not work.

"There are so few people out there who can afford private-pay," said Morrison. Those costs for various types of service average around \$15 an hour, she said. "If the funding stops, we stop."

"It is horrific that so many people are waiting for services, however our industry ... could not really support those folks anyway if the money was there," Morrison said.

If funding were to increase to cut down the wait, Morrison said her organization could not take on more people due to the lack of people applying to be a caregiver in the program.

Low pay is not the reason Gordon shows up at work, however. Instead, she's driven by the family relationship she has built with those inside the home, but she said people outside the home generally do not appreciate what she does.

" 'You're a babysitter.' I have heard that a lot. We are not babysitting; we are making their lives better," she said.

Several years ago, Gordon began taking care of Samantha Randall, who has been disabled since birth. She remembers Randall clinching her hands due to stress created by living at a center in Enid.

It was a place her mother, Suzanne Randall, 77, called a warehouse and a bad experiment.

"She would be in another warehouse if it were not for this program," said Randall, who is

hoping the program is not scaled back.

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