
MANHATTAN DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES COUNCIL

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WORKFORCE ISSUES

Presented by Haggith Johnson
Parent
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My son Joshua is 21 years old. He's an artist. His school was always commissioning him to do their artwork. Every time he meets someone new, he asks their name and draws a picture of them. He's very friendly and loving.

Joshua is diagnosed with autism and mild mental retardation, and he has a sort of impulse disorder. He needs one-on-one supervision at all times because he will touch anyone around him inappropriately. He will also elope if he has half a chance. He has aggressive behaviors, and he weighs 300 pounds. When he was 14, he went to a children's residential program to help him with his behaviors. Now he's in an adult residence.

Direct support staff have to keep him in line of sight at all times because he has no sense of danger: he'll try to jump from the floor onto a chair. He'll do very bad things like hit the staff. Then he becomes very remorseful, and that can be overwhelming for him. He says sorry, sorry, and it takes him a long time to calm down.

Staff turnover is a tremendous problem. There is so much turnover I can't even remember the names of the staff. There are new people all the time.

When staff leave not only my son but all the residents are upset. They miss out on the love and care that those staff gave them. New staff don't know the residents, aren't used to how they communicate, don't understand them, don't know what their triggers are, or how to redirect them. And when there are unmet needs, you will have a behavior. Turnover always affects behavior. In the past 5 months, Joshua has been in the hospital emergency room 15 times for behaviors.

A lot of the staff love working with these guys and wish they could stay, but the salary is too low. They are just making minimum wage. They work other jobs just to make ends meet.

Legislators need to value direct care staff and treat them as professionals. They need to give more money for the staff. The work of direct care for people with developmental disabilities is a profession. It is not a minimum wage job.