

Dear legislators and staff,

I was not able to attend this hearing last week, but have some thoughts I would like to share with the committee. While I am a member of the Board of North Bay Regional Center, I write representing solely my own views and opinions, not those of the Board as a whole. First, I want to say that I wholly support the regional center system for delivery of services to California's developmentally disabled citizens. I think this localized systems allows for a more personalized delivery of services and potentially a greater level of local involvement and oversight. I do, however, feel that certain changes to the current system are necessary to better assure accountability of the system to consumers, families and tax payers, as well as to strive towards a more even and equitable allocation of resources across the state. My suggestions are as follows:

1. I would see the application of the California Public Records Act to the regional centers. While this is not necessarily supported by many within the regional center system, I have voiced my support for this because I feel it would provide the public with more information about the operation and expenditures of the centers. In turn, this would empower greater oversight and accountability. As a public servant myself, I am familiar with the PRA and how it applies. It is sometimes burdensome to address these requests and it is necessary to consider when personal information must be protected (the PRA has ample provisions to allow for this), but I believe in the purpose and the consequence. Public agencies that must adhere to these disclosure requirements have nothing to hide, because they are not allowed to act in a secretive manner. Taxpayers, families and consumers have the right to know what is being spent by the centers on rates and on employee salaries, as these organizations are fully funded by tax payer dollars, and indeed avail themselves to other public benefits such as CalPERS retirement, etc.
2. In place of the past across the board cuts to purchase of services, I would advocate for greater standardization of rates and services. I believe that this is something that ARCA and regional centers have been looking at. It is not an easy solution because of the disparate operational details among the centers. Also, it is important in this process not to lose the ability to calibrate for regional differences, such as cost of living, and differences in availability of generic services. I feel, however, that some greater level of standardization is essential to the fair and reasonable maintenance of the regional center system. Without it, I fear the system may not be sustainable.
3. I do feel that the regional center system must work hard to assure that it listens to the voices of families, case managers, vendors and other professionals who have a personal stake in the well being of the system, and more importantly, the consumers. While I support the movement towards self-advocacy, I want to make sure that this doesn't become a veiled means to placing the most important consumer decisions in the hands of those few at the supervisor and manager levels within the regional center system. Family members and those individuals who spend their days working directly with the consumers, should be presumed to have their best interests at heart and to know them the best. While these instances of fear to speak out do not appear to be the norm, there nonetheless should be a process for those who have concerns to freely voice them without fear of retribution for themselves or their loved ones.

Thank you for taking the time to hold these hearings and conduct this investigation. It is important work that we do and it does impact people's lives and in some instances their very existence. I have had the privilege to learn more about the regional center system as I have served on the Board at North Bay Regional Center, which is an excellent center. In these times of financial pressure, it is essential to remember that the focus must be on the consumer and how best to assure individual care and services continue in the most accountable and beneficial way possible. These are difficult challenges and I am grateful that we have some very talented people working on these issues.

Sincerely, Molly Dillon