

Employee shortage a major crisis for Hattie Larlham, Ohio's disabled



Along the Way

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Columnist

What if you had a child, perhaps an infant, a youngster, or even a grown-up with severe intellectual or developmental disabilities who depended on the special services that only an organization like Hattie Larlham provides. Now, imagine if you were told that because of staffing shortages, your child could no longer secure those services?



Colecchi

According to Stephen Colecchi, CEO of Hattie Larlham, that challenging situation is starting to occur across the state of Ohio due to a shortage of those wanting to work in facilities that provide such services and support because the pay is no longer competitive.

"There is a growing crisis throughout Ohio," he said. "The evidence indicates a starting salary of at least \$20 per hour for a Direct Service Professional is necessary to compete for employees with Amazon and big box retailers," he said. "The current starting wage of \$14 to \$15.50 per hour no longer attracts applicants to our field."

Approximately 99 percent of the funding for Hattie Larlham comes from Medicaid, a combination of federal and state money. Appeals to Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine have resulted in additional Medicaid funding being included in the governor's proposed 2024-2025 state budget. According to Colecchi, this additional funding will allow Hattie Larlham to increase starting salaries for DSPs by approximately \$2 per hour.

"That is helpful and shows the governor recognizes our plight," Colecchi said, "but it is not the full funding solution and more needs to be done."

Colecchi said he and other leaders in the field believe Ohio is going to have to increase its Medicaid funding so that at least a \$20 per hour wage is possible "or we are going to have a significant shortage of employees needed to provide care and support for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities."

There are few options for care for those Ohioans who have complex medical issues in addition to their disabilities. Hospitals and skilled nursing facilities would not typically be able to deal with that combination of issues; and the costs would be significantly higher than the costs of providing the care and support in an ICF such as the Hattie Larlham Center.

There is the option of care in the home using home health professionals and members of the family, Colecchi said, "but that is usually possible only for the short term because the kind of care needed will exhaust the resources of most families."

Nearly always, severe intellectual and developmental disabilities begin at birth and continue as a lifetime issue in which modest improvements are possible, but normal functionality in many cases is not.

Hattie Larlham, which began in 1961 in the home of

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Hattie and Richard Larlham in Mantua, has grown into one of the largest developmental disability providers in Ohio. It has a \$61 million budget.

Its flagship operation is an Intermediate Care Facility on a Mantua campus that serves 124 individuals. Many of the residents have complex medical issues in addition to their intellectual or developmental disabilities. Hattie Larlham reaches as far south as Columbus and operates five Intermediate Care Facility Group Homes, more than 60 Supported Living and Waiver Homes, and seven Adult Day Program locations. It also provides a wide range of employment services designed to help people with disabilities if they are able to enter the world of work.

Like other developmental disability providers, Hattie Larlham relies on direct support professionals, including registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, respiratory therapists, and other staff. Its budgeted staff shows 889 full-time equipment employees, but currently has 166 full-time openings, including 129 professional roles.

Hattie Larlham is one of only five intermediate care facilities in Ohio offering a ventilator program. The daily add-on charge for the vent program has not increased since 2013, but operating costs have.

To cope, Hattie Larlham last year paid out \$5.4 million in overtime and special incentive pay.

"The response of our employees has been heroic," Colecchi said, "but we cannot ask our employees to continue to work those overtime hours at the same pace moving forward. It is not healthy from the standpoint of life-work balance. It is also not sustainable from a financial standpoint long term."

"Whether you are an elected official, a parent or guardian, an employee, a board member of volunteer, or someone with an interest in the services provided by the developmental disabilities provider network in Ohio, we collectively have the responsibility to ensure our employees are paid an acceptable hourly rate that allows us to compete and address our staffing needs and, most importantly, meet the needs of our fellow Ohioans with intellectual and development disabilities."

"These folks and their families depend on us," he said. "Ohio needs to step up and the Ohio Legislature needs to increase the funding for all providers of developmental disability services."

David E. Dix is a retired publisher of the Record-Courier.