

Washington must help

In the Covid-19 crisis, cuts to social service agencies demand federal dollars

The nonprofit agencies delivering services for the disabled provide an urgent public good, yet continue, year after year, struggling under government budget decisions.

Now, with Albany under the financial assault of the coronavirus pandemic, those agencies are facing an Armageddon of threats. Washington needs to step up. Without its assistance, real people – workers and their beneficiaries – will suffer real hardships.

Direct support professionals were supposed to get raises this year – 2% on Jan. 1 and another 2% on April 1. But they're not coming. Making matters worse and then worse again, Albany is instituting additional cuts under the pressure of a soaring budget deficit and plans more reductions in the fall. It can't work – not if the care of people with disabilities matters.

Among the organizations hurt by these cuts are Aspire of Western New York, People Inc., and other members of the Developmental Disabilities Alliance of Western New York.

New York is the primary payer of services provided by

these organizations, 41% of which have no more than 30 days of cash on hand, according to the New York Disability Advocates Survey conducted in April.

But New York was facing a budget deficit before the pandemic struck. Since then, its deficit deepened. A report by the state Division of Budget calls for New York to close its projected \$13.3 billion budget shortfall by cutting several billion in spending, including a 20% reduction in aid to localities, which provides funding for these programs.

In addition, the state is looking at an additional budget cut of \$238 million set for Oct. 1. It may be inevitable, given the current economic realities, but it could be catastrophic for these agencies.

Nothing has changed in the work these nonprofit agencies do. The need remains, regardless of the pandemic. They employ front-line heroes, and yet they need funding to provide quality services.

There is a reason that unlike states and lower governments, Washington is not mandated to balance its budget. That freedom is frequently misused, but the nation is in a crisis. If the federal government doesn't respond to the needs to human service agencies and the humans they serve, the suffering will be severe.