



2015 Legislative Updates

The **2016 State Budget** was approved on March 30th at midnight. Some budget items of interest include the following:

Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities

- Increase funding for 75 NOW/COMP waivers to address the community waiting list of over 7,000 Georgians. (\$1,124,226 total)
- Supported Employment - \$490,000 in new funding was approved.
- Department of Community Health - Increase the ICWP (Independent Care Waiver Program)
- Personal Support Services rate by 75 cents per hour (\$1,994,142 total)

It is worth noting that there were *no additional funding* added for Postsecondary education for persons with disabilities; however, a study committee was approved thru HR642, sponsored by Rep. Katie Dempsey (Rome).

Department of Education - PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports)

- \$275,000 in new funding. Last year part time positions were funded in 16 regions and with these funds some will be able to add full-time staff.

Bills of particular interest that passed this session:

- **SB 1 and HB 429:** SB 1, the autism insurance bill known as **Ava's Law**, sponsored by Sen. Charlie Bethel (Dalton), was attached to HB 429 with some modifications. Prior to attaching the autism bill language, HB 429, sponsored by Rep. Ron Stephens prevents health benefit plans from restricting coverage for prescribed treatment based upon an insured's diagnosis with a terminal condition. An agreement was reached between the chairmen of the House and Senate insurance committees to combine these bills to allow some children with autism to be covered by insurance. It will require individual insurance providers to cover autism for children 6 and under unless the plan is provided by an employer with 10 or fewer employees. There is a \$30,000 per child per year cap for applied behavior analysis, but no cap on the number of visits permitted. This does not apply to the Qualified Health Plans marketed on the Georgia health insurance exchange. The combined bill easily passed the Senate this week and

the agreement just passed the house today so will go to the Governor's desk to be signed within 40 days. This bill signing will most likely be a public one with much celebration. Advocates have worked for the past 6 years to see this legislation pass in GA. We are now the 41st state to offer this insurance coverage!

- **HB 1 - Medical Marijuana – Haleigh's Hope Act.** This legislation sponsored by Rep. Allen Peake (Macon) allows the limited use of medical cannabis oil (no more than 5% THC, to possess no more than 20 fl. oz.) to treat eight disorders: cancer, Crohn's disease, Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS), mitochondrial disease, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, seizure disorders, and sickle cell. Before Georgians can begin using CBD oil, the state will still have to set up the Low THC Oil Patient Registry. The Department of Public Health is charged with establishing procedures, rules, and regulations to assist doctors in making the certifications that a patient has a qualifying condition. The Governor has signed this bill into law already.
- **HB62** waives the one-year public school requirement for special needs scholarship for special needs students whose parent is an active duty military service member stationed in Georgia within the previous year.
- **HB91** eliminates **Georgia High School Graduation Test:** March 30, Governor Deal signed HB 91 into law and was effective immediately. This bill eliminates the Georgia High School Graduation Test as a requirement. Up to 8,000 students who have met all high school graduation requirements with the exception of passing either the High School Graduation Tests or the Basic Skills tests, can petition their school board to grant them a diploma. The diploma will be issued for the date which the student should have graduated from the high school. At the school board's discretion the student may be permitted to participate in commencement exercises at the high school.
- **HR 642:** This resolution creates a House study committee on Employment First and Post-secondary Education options for people with disabilities was passed by the House. A study committee will be appointed soon.
- **Employment First:** The goal was to encourage lawmakers to adopt an *Employment First* initiative in the state. Currently, in Georgia, only 14% of individuals with developmental disabilities are employed in the community. And, providers receive more money to support an individual in a non-work setting than they do for supporting an individual to work in their community. Advocates pressed their representatives to open the lines of communication between relevant state agencies to set inclusive employment as the priority outcome for individuals with developmental disabilities in the state's service system. The

study committee set up thru HB642 could support positive legislation around employment next year.

If you have questions or would like more information, contact Claire Dees, Community Engagement Manager, claire@p2pga.org