



**Identifying the Scope of Services for People with Disabilities
in Travis County**
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Identifying the Scopes of Services for People with Disabilities in Travis County

Executive Summary

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Background

Disability service providers are contracted by the State of Texas through the Department of Disability and Aging Services (DADS) and the Department of Rehabilitative Services (DARS). These departments then contract with Travis County service providers to provide disability services to individuals with disabilities. Travis County also has several private disability service providers that do not contract with the State. To receive services from these agencies, one must be able to pay out-of-pocket or with the assistance of private insurance.

There are three ways to finance disability services in Travis County: out-of-pocket, with private insurance, or with Medicaid-waiver insurance programs. For individuals without private insurance, or the inability to pay out-of-pocket for services, Medicaid insurance waivers are used to obtain disability services. There are over 65,000 people waiting to receive disability services through Medicaid waiver programs in Texas. Of that 65,000, approximately 2,700 are located in Travis County. The wait time to receive disability services with Medicaid waivers is projected to be between 8-12 years. For individuals waiting to receive Medicaid funds, General Revenue funds are administered to supplement services. General Revenue funds are provided through the contracted agency and can range anywhere between \$200-\$450 per month, depending on the respective needs. It should be noted that \$200-\$450 per month is not enough money to adequately address the needs of individuals with disabilities.

Definitions

Definitions of disabilities can vary depending on agency and individual preference. For the purposes of this project, our group received permission from the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities at the University of Texas at Austin to use their definitions of the following disabilities: vision, deaf and hard of hearing, and mobility.

Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD): Intellectual disability is a disability characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior. The disability originates before the age of 18. Developmental disabilities are severe chronic disabilities that can be cognitive, physical, or both. These disabilities appear before the age of 22 and are likely to be life long. Some developmental disabilities are largely physical issues, such as Cerebral Palsy or epilepsy. Some individuals may have a condition that includes a physical and intellectual disability, such as Down syndrome, Autism, or Mental Retardation (MR). IDD is the preferred terminology over cognitive or intellectual disability. MR is not widely used or accepted.

Vision: Visual disabilities include blind/low blind vision, visually impaired, and Visual Processing Disorder. A person who is blind is visually impaired. Visual disabilities are not always obvious. A person may move about without assistance and read printed texts.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing: Those born deaf before learning to speak, usually before the age of 3, often consider themselves culturally Deaf, and communicate in a difference language, ASL (American Sign Language). They may not consider themselves “disabled”, but rather are part of the Deaf culture, with their own language. People who are hard of hearing, or are post-lingually deaf, have lost some of their hearing, mildly to profoundly, after learning to communicate in the hearing world. They may function in both the hearing world and the Deaf culture.

Physical: Individuals with physical disabilities may use assistive devices, which are considered part of their personal space. The disability can be progressive or stable. Examples include: Muscular Dystrophy, spinal cord injuries, Cerebral Palsy, Spina Bifida, neurological conditions, and Rheumatoid arthritis.

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI): ECI is a statewide program, mandated nationally by Part C of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), for families with children, birth to three, with disabilities and developmental delays. ECI supports families to help their children reach their potential through developmental services.

Scope of Services

Listed are summaries of the services provided by disability service providers in Travis County. This project focused on five areas of disability: intellectual and developmental, Deaf and hard of hearing, early childhood, mobility, and vision disabilities.

Intellectual and Developmental Disability (IDD) Service Providers

There are over 21 service providers, offering more than 65 programs, to serve the IDD community in Travis County. The IDD community includes individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Asperger's, Down syndrome, Mental Retardation, Fetal Alcohol syndrome, and Traumatic Brain Injury. The majority of programs offer wrap-around services that include but are not limited to: case management, supportive services, housing, personal/attendant care, day habilitation, respite, transportation, education, and leisure activities. The programs are fairly comprehensive, however there are waiting lists and specific requirements to qualify for the majority of services and programs. Furthermore, the majority of service providers are for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder or Asperger's, however those providers are mainly private and do not accept Medicaid waivers as payment. There is a lack of services specific to individuals with MR, Traumatic Brain Injuries, and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. The Arc of the Capital Area, Austin-Travis County Integral Care, Department of Aging and Disability Services, Department of Rehabilitative Services, and Easter Seals are the main IDD providers in Travis County.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Providers

There are 15 organizations in the Travis County area serving those who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Services range from education, equipment vouchers, tuition waivers, and interpreter training to referrals and case management to clubs, associations, networking, and advocacy. Travis County Health and Human Services and the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services are the main providers in Travis County.

Early Childhood Intervention Providers

There are 17 organizations in the Travis County area serving children 0-5 with special needs and their parents. These range from inclusive preschools, therapeutic services, basic needs assistance, nutrition, and developmental assessments to support groups, networking organizations, referrals, and advocacy. Any Baby Can, Easter Seals, and Austin-Travis County Integral Care are the primary providers of ECI in Travis County.

Mobility Service Providers

There is a wide range of service providers for people with mobility disabilities. Services include: transportation, employment services, attendant care, therapy, support groups, and advocacy groups, adaptive equipment service providers, and children-specific services. There are 44 service providers in Travis County.

Vision Service Providers

Travis County has more than 12 providers that serve people who are blind or visually impaired, offering more than 24 programs between each of these organizations. These programs provide the following types of services: vocational training, employment, education, occupational therapy, physical therapy, community resource referrals, service coordination, computer, Braille, transportation, short-term residential care, independent living, and mentoring. The majority of these services are free of cost to the individual receiving services as long as the person meets the qualifications and requirements designated by each organization and program.

Key Findings

Travis County severely lacks funding for disability services. There is both a lack of funding for State contracted disability service provider agencies, as well as a lack of funding for individuals seeking disability services from these agencies.

- IDD service providers do not have enough funding to provide comprehensive therapeutic services. As well, there is a gap in specially trained IDD service providers and the funding needed to pay them at the proper level.
- Audiologists are not aware of DARS services that will help pay for hearing aids and other assistive devices. Hard of hearing patients often pay full price for assistive devices when they could have been receiving financial help from DARS. Many hard of hearing students are unaware of the tuition waivers for college.
- There are significant gaps with the ECI population. 1600 children in Texas are being raised in institutions, rather than in families. Behavioral, medical, and social needs are high for early childhood special needs, and to build the daycare and preschool facilities to support these children is costly, and only a few currently exist. As well, there is a gap in specially trained early childhood special needs teachers, and the funding needed to pay them at the proper level.
- Travis County has a lack of qualified providers willing to accept Medicaid waivers. Additionally, the wait time to receive disability services through Medicaid waiver programs is 8-12 years. Individuals with disabilities are not receiving the comprehensive services required because there are not available funds to pay for the services. Furthermore, Medicaid only pays for limited amounts of physical, occupational, and speech therapy.

Disability needs and services are quite costly and there are not enough financial supports in place to help individuals with disabilities receive these necessary therapies and services.

Recommendations

Deaf and Hard of Hearing:

Further research is recommended into the dissemination of DARS services to private audiologists in the area, so that audiologists are aware that their clients could be receiving free or reduced priced hearing aids. As well, further research is recommended into the distribution of college tuition waivers for deaf and hard of hearing students and adults interested in furthering their educations.

Early Childhood Interventions (ECI):

Further research is needed into the number of children waiting for early childhood special needs education, specifically for children 0-3, before they are able to attend the Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities, and the affordability of this care for low and middle income families. Anecdotal research indicates a lack of early childhood centers with the necessary facilities and qualified specially trained staff to serve medically fragile and high needs children under 5. As well, research is needed to find out the scope of services available to families for special needs children in the summers while district wide programs are not in session.

There is a long wait list for Head Start and Early Head Start (approximately 4500 applications for 2100 slots). Further research is recommended to the scope of services available to these families and their children, especially considering Head Start is an inclusive program for early childhood special needs.

Anecdotal evidence also points to a lack of ability to continue to give ECI therapies to children when they enter the hospital. Medically fragile children who are in and out of the hospital then have disrupted services by ECI providers in Travis County, as ECI providers cannot continue their care while the child is in the hospital. Further research is recommended into this issue, and the possibility of collaboration with hospitals and ECI providers.

Mobility:

More research needs to be done regarding gaps in services. Additionally, more research should be done about how Medicaid could be expanded to provide more therapy and home health care. One idea is to look at what incentives could be given to increase the number of service providers and to make service providers more willing to take Medicaid. Another idea is to find what gaps the clients perceive and what they do to cope with those gaps in resources in their own lives. Finally, funding could be set aside to teach family members to provide therapy for people with disabilities. By doing this one therapist could supervise several clients instead of having one therapist per client which would allow resources to go further.

Vision:

Further research is needed to understand the services that Austin Independent School District provide to students who are blind or visually impaired. Research should also explore how many people are considered blind or visually impaired and how many seek out services. There are a few transition support services for students who are moving from dependent living to independent living. Research these services are reaching as many clients as needed is also

needed. Additionally, it appeared that there were much fewer organizations that specifically provide services to people who are blind or visually impaired. Understanding why this seems to be the case is important for future research.