My name is Marsha Dumka and I am a retired CEO of a multi program early care and learning agency that provides a range of children’s services including Early Intervention. I also currently Co-Chair the Rochester and Monroe County early childhood collaborative. I am testifying today on behalf of Winning Beginning NY for which I serve as Co-Chair of the Steering Committee.

Winning Beginning NY is a statewide coalition working toward the goal of high-quality, affordable and accessible early care and learning for all New York families. Its members include parents, employers, children's advocates, service providers, labor unions, educators, pediatricians, law enforcement, research and community groups. Our vision is for an early childhood system that promotes planning, coordination, and implementation strategies that strengthen early care and learning resulting in high quality early learning, healthy children, and strong families.

As a coalition dedicated to a high-quality system of early care and learning, we know that Early Intervention is a vital part of the continuum of early childhood education services we provide for children. EI services help young children who are behind catch up and prepare for kindergarten, reducing later special education and rehabilitation costs and maximizing the potential for individuals with disabilities to live independently and be productive citizens.

Given the importance of EI services, we are deeply concerned about the initial implementation of the statewide EI fiscal agent and the legislative change requiring individual EI providers to wait for payment until health insurance companies have decided whether or not to contribute to the cost of a child’s services. These changes have led to significant delays in payment for EI providers. The early childhood system cannot work if a segment of providers are waiting months and months for payment.

In addition to the delays in payment, the rocky implementation of the fiscal agent has created numerous issues, including constant changes in procedures, endless administrative work that requires additional staff or staff time to manage, that has resulted in multiple agencies around the state either giving up their service to the youngest and neediest of this states’ children, or reducing the number of children they are able to risk serving. Some larger diverse agencies have managed to maintain their case loads by pulling funding from other services, but this is only temporary and cannot be maintained.

We have heard from agencies across the state that have been impacted by the changes to the reimbursement process in the following ways:

1. Private insurance payments are significantly delayed and occur on an irregular basis, making budgeting and fiscal responsibility extremely challenging.
2. There has been an extraordinary increase in time spent by administrative staff to follow up on payments, verify information and link payments to billing, increasing their administrative costs exponentially.

3. Payments by insurance companies have been sent directly to families. Follow up is cumbersome and involves having the family submit a check to the agency, which in turn involves sending it back to the insurance company, which in turn will issue another reimbursement check (supposedly). In some cases, parents have spent the money they have received, understandably thinking the money was rightfully theirs, so the status of those reimbursements is precarious.

4. Over the past few months, checks of varying amounts have been received on an irregular basis and do not have an invoice attached to them. Thus, providers cannot match them to their billing statements and cannot determine what payment has been received for what service.

5. Service Coordinators, who used to support families as they learn of their child’s disability and help families navigate the system, are now being asked to become insurance researchers to gather information on the family’s insurance status for billing.

Our most significant concern is the impact that these challenges have on access to high-quality Early Intervention services. We have heard examples from counties ranging from New York City to Westchester to Rochester of some of our highest quality EI agencies closing and some of our most experienced EI clinicians leaving the field. Others simply no longer provide EI services stating they will come back into the system when it is fixed. Others have reduced the services they will provide through EI. Between the changes to the process of reimbursement and the cuts to reimbursement rates over the past few years, these providers and agencies simply could not afford to stay in business. The loss of these providers not only impacts young children with developmental delays or disabilities, but has a significant impact on the education system and on taxpayers, who have to bear the burden when we fail to address children’s delays as early in life as possible when services are most effective.

 Winning Beginning NY asks that the state immediately address these challenges with the reimbursement process to ensure that hard-working EI providers receive payment for their work in a timely manner so that children can continue to benefit from high-quality EI services.

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