

## Autism Services, Inc. NYSED and OPWDD Program Transfer – FAQ

### **What is the situation and when did People Inc. become involved?**

Autism Services has faced significant operational and financial challenges that were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier this year, Autism Services approached People Inc., a non-profit organization in Western New York that serves people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, seeking an affiliation to provide assistance with administrative, back-office and managerial support. On March 1, 2023, People Inc. entered into an affiliation agreement with Autism Services and began a series of strategic assessment initiatives to understand its financial situation and operational needs for the future.

Immediately following the affiliation, People Inc.'s administrative team began providing much-needed financial guidance and business office support to Autism Services and evaluated its fiscal viability. It was then discovered that Autism Services was operating with a \$3 million deficit, and an estimated monthly loss rate of over \$200,000. In order to confirm the accuracy of its analysis, People Inc. retained an independent, outside accounting and consulting firm to provide a detailed cash flow analysis to determine how long Autism Services could sustain operations. The result of this cash flow analysis revealed that Autism Services' cash reserves will be exhausted in early January 2024.

Since the onset of the affiliation, People Inc. has been singularly focused on maintaining uninterrupted services for all people served by Autism Services. With People Inc.'s involvement, Autism Services has pursued aggressive and deliberate efforts to stabilize operations; however, the strategic assessment revealed these challenges have become too great to overcome.

### **What is the plan for ASI?**

Given Autism Services' dire and uncorrectable financial situation, Autism Service's Board of Directors has determined that the best solution to fulfill its mission is to transition operation of its programs to other agencies with the capacity and expertise to support them. While People Inc. has more than 50 years of experience in supporting people with developmental disabilities, The Summit Center, an organization with an outstanding reputation in Western New York for providing high quality, evidence-based instruction to children with autism, was engaged to help formulate a strategy to preserve Autism Services' Hazelwood and Elmwood School Age Programs.

With a shared goal to preserve the continuity of all Autism Services programs for the community, the agency with People Inc., and Summit have prepared the following plan:

1. As approved by the New York State Office of People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD), on February 1, 2024, Autism Services will transfer operation of its

OPWDD- funded services and programs to People Inc. This includes all group homes, day programs and other services, with the exception of the School Age Special Education programs. All group homes and day programs will remain open in the same locations and all employees at those locations will be offered positions within People Inc.

2. On or around February 1, 2024, Autism Services will transfer operation of Autism Services' School Age Special Education Programs at their existing locations, to The Summit Center, pending final approval from the New York State Education Department (NYSED). Summit intends to continue students' educational experiences with faculty and aides that they know and trust.

3. Once the OPWDD programs are transferred to People Inc. and the School Age Programs are transferred to Summit, Autism Services as an organization will cease operations.

***This plan ensures that all of Autism Services' programs and services will continue without disruption.***

People and families participating in Autism Services programs and services are all invited to participate in a series of discussion forums to learn more details and understand the next steps.

#### **What has been done to preserve the schools and residential services?**

Autism Services' leadership team has taken extraordinary steps in a short amount of time to attempt to correct Autism Services' course and preserve its programs and services. Since the Affiliation, Autism Services and People Inc. have taken the following steps to increase revenue and decrease expenses:

- Addressed vacancies in the student population and increased school enrollment to near capacity with 25 new students.
- Sought and received reconciled rates for NYSED services that had not been updated or increased since 2011.
- Restored compliance with HUD for its residences and received a 70 percent rent increase for rates that had been untouched since 1998.
- Increased enrollment in day programs and filled vacancies in IRAs.
- Developed operating budgets and processes, financial statements, and procurement parameters across the organization.
- Assessed and renegotiated contracts to create efficiencies and reduce expenditures.
- Evaluated payroll and eliminated excessive stipends, capped additional hours for exempt employees, and reduced overtime expenses whenever possible.
- Implemented a hiring freeze for administrative positions, while increasing hiring efforts for direct support professionals.

Because of the strategic initiatives implemented over the past six months, ASI was able to preserve jobs and maintain services without disruption. However, given the extent of the financial challenges, these extraordinary efforts cannot overcome the significant operating deficit. In conjunction with OPWDD and NYSED, Autism Services, People Inc., and Summit have formulated the current plan to preserve services to the community.

### **With so many improvements and changes, why has ASI reached this decision now?**

Despite the efforts undertaken, Autism Services will deplete its resources in January 2024. The only solution to ensure that the needs of its students and people served are met is to transition Autism Services' programs and services to other agencies with the capacity and expertise to support them.

### **What will happen to the ASI facilities and staff?**

At this time, all Autism Services programs, including school-based educational programs, day program services, and residences, will continue in the same locations and facilities. Both People Inc. and Summit are prepared to hire staff currently working at the schools, group homes, and day programs.

### **When will these transitions occur?**

The transfer of OPWDD programs is approved and scheduled for February 1, 2024. The transition of the School Age Education Programs is expected to also occur on or around February 1, 2024.

### **How was Summit selected to transition school programming?**

As parents or guardians are well aware, alternative educational programs for students with autism or developmental disabilities are limited and significant coordination with the home school district is required in the placement of students. Summit has an outstanding reputation in Western New York for providing high quality, evidence-based instruction. As one of the largest educational providers in the region, Summit is specially qualified to accept a transfer of students at the preschool, elementary, and secondary levels.

### **Why was People Inc. selected to administer the OPWDD IRAs and day programs?**

People Inc. was approached and approved as the designated affiliate by the ASI Board of Directors in March 2023. People Inc. is the largest non-profit organization in Western New York that serves people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It operates more than 180 facilities across the region, including 140 IRAs and ICFs and numerous day programs. People Inc.'s has both the capacity, experience, and person-centered mission to continue ASI's programs.