



Dear Governor Hogan:

I am the Executive Director and Co-Founder of Itineris, a non-profit organization based in Baltimore City, that is one of a handful of your autism-specific DDA providers in Maryland. I am also a mom to my 30-year-old autistic daughter, Annie, and writing to you today to beg that you continue Appendix K for DDA waiver services until six months after the federal Public Health Emergency, as previously approved in the State's request.

From March 13, 2020, through July 6, 2021 Itineris was closed to on-site services and supports. Until February, 2021 we were only able to provide virtual learning opportunities and then gradually began some limited in-home supports all due to COVID-19. This has been the most challenging year in our ten-year history, both financially and emotionally. And, of course, for the individuals we serve it was the greatest disruption in their normally very routine bound lives. For the first time, we were forced to furlough 100 staff and pivot our 100% in person service model to a 100% virtual model. This required creating additional processes, rewriting curriculum, investing time and financial resources in retraining staff, clients and families all in the midst of a global pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, we had about 136 staff who worked exclusively in person with our clients.

Additionally, due to COVID-19, were forced to pause admissions as we did not have the staffing capacity to accept new clients into our services. As one of the few autism specific providers in the State, this meant that we had to turn away applicants with significant needs with very little choice available. While we have actively been recruiting for new staff. We currently only have 52 staff, 12 of whom are administrative personnel. This is well below what is needed to comply with mandated ratios to support our clients' needs for in-person services. Through Appendix K, we have been given the flexibility to support clients for shorter periods of time (one hour in order to bill for a day versus the previous requirements of four to six hours per day). This allowed us to see more clients in a day in an individualized manner, while maintaining our required staff to client ratio. Another imperative part of Appendix K is that, we are able to support our most challenging clients for short periods of time in their homes with parental support, as we have been able to hire parents and family members as temporary workers. We have also been able to provide behavioral telehealth and limited in-person behavioral services for our clients with Behavior Plans, Services and Supports. For many of our families, who were not and are still not comfortable with outside people entering their homes, these parents have been trained to provide their loved ones supports using programming provided by our professionals.

Given our severe staffing shortage and the challenges that COVID-19 brought upon all us, Appendix K was an excellent transition to the hourly LTSS system, where clients were able to pick from a menu of service options rather than being reliant on the four to six hour previously mandated day. Truly, Appendix K has been a lifeline for us to continue to bill for services and provide a meaningful experience for our clients.

Last year, Itineris lost almost \$1,000,000 in client revenue, which is staggering considering the size of our operations. Many autistic individuals did not do well with virtual supports so they were unable to participate in services in the early months of the pandemic. We have gradually rebuilt our in-person client services, but severely need the flexibilities that Appendix K allows to survive.



With Appendix K in effect, we will have the time to diligently hire staff so that we can gradually increase onsite and community-based services. In addition, our clients will be able to and return to work with their required supports. We have been working with our clients and their families to reimagine the community-based supports and services. Without Appendix K, the ability to create individualized schedules and implement them would be gone because the hourly model in LTSS has not yet been implemented.

There is **NO WAY**, we could resume services to pre-pandemic levels of support with this limited amount of notice. We have been told again and again, that Appendix K would be running through June 30, 2022 and have budgeted and planned accordingly. Asking agencies to ramp up services to pre-COVID-19 expectations in such a short period of time would be unrealistic, financially devastating and unsustainable due to the huge national staffing crisis. Most agencies ramp up their hiring in May and June, to allow plenty of time for professional development, training, shadowing, and learning their jobs so they can be incorporated into schedules eight to ten weeks later. Understanding the quality and time needed to train someone to work with autistic adults requires tremendous planning. Availability is another huge issue now as we are only getting 1-2 applicants per week and we are competing with hundreds of other employers trying to ramp up their workforces. Therefore, if Appendix K is lifted prior to the promised timeline, I am positive that we would have to keep 80% of our clients in virtual learning this entire fiscal year, which would be extremely detrimental to their health, safety and mental health needs as well as the ability of their families to return to their pre-pandemic lives. I am sure this will hold true for all DDA providers as well.

PLEASE stick to the promises made. We are all good people trying to do the best we can for the clients who we support and the families count on us. Appendix K will allow us to slowly rebuild our workforces, bring clients back to onsite learning, open admissions for individuals transitioning from school-based services, and increase community-based learning and expand our services (for our current clients) in an organized and well-planned return. Appendix K is quite literally lifesaving.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to discuss any questions or details you would like clarified.

With a grateful heart,

Ami Taubenfeld  
Executive Director, Co-Founder and MOM  
Itineris, Inc.