



Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Services Act (“Lanterman Act”) Background

Nearly half a century ago, visionary lawmakers in California undertook a bipartisan overhaul of what had become a shameful and costly system of warehousing people with developmental disabilities in remote institutions. By passing the landmark [Lanterman Developmental Disabilities Services Act](#) (Welfare and Institutions Code, beginning with Section 4500) in 1969, they created the state-funded, privately-operated system of community care that has enabled those with developmental disabilities to receive the critical services they need in their communities through regional centers.

In addition to enabling parents of children with even the severest disabilities to care for their children at home, this pioneering system has provided a cost-effective means for adults with developmental disabilities to receive essential services and supports they need to live safely and with dignity in mainstream society.

This system has evolved as our understanding has grown about the needs and capacities of people with developmental disabilities, and the challenges that they and their families face. Similarly, mainstream societal attitudes have changed, reflecting greater acceptance and appreciation for those with disabilities. California’s Regional Centers -- in collaboration with a diverse pool of service providers – have responded with innovative services and supports that have greatly advanced the original Lanterman vision of full inclusion for people with developmental disabilities in all aspects of community life. Likewise, scientific advances in recent years have yielded effective therapies for conditions such as autism, a developmental disability that was poorly-understood in the 1960s and was not even covered by the original Lanterman Act.

Now nearly 50 years old, the Lanterman Act remains unique in the nation. A 1985 California State Supreme Court decision affirmed the Lanterman guarantee of services. No other state has made a similar promise of community-based services and supports for people with developmental disabilities and their families.

To read a comprehensive history of California’s Regional Center system of community care, click [here](#) to download [“Reaffirming the Commitment...Realizing the Vision”](#) a publication produced by the Frank D. Lanterman Regional Center in Los Angeles. To read the text of the Lanterman Act, visit the [California Department of Developmental Disabilities](#) web site, which also features both English and Spanish versions of a [Consumer’s Guide to the Lanterman Act](#).