

**Title: Reducing Waitlists for Autism Testing**

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**For: Arkansas Autism Legislative Task Force**

# Steps to Reduce the Waitlist for the Autism Waiver Services Program by Adding LPP to ACT 656 (2021)

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## The Role of the Licensed Psychological Practitioner (LPP)

Arkansas faces a shortage of psychological professionals. To help meet this need, the Arkansas Legislature passed **Act 433 (2025)**, and this act created the Licensed Psychological Practitioner (LPP), formerly Licensed Psychological Examiner - Independent (LPE-I). **These professionals possess the qualifications to administer the ADOS-2, which is often considered "gold standard" for Autism Spectrum Disorder assessment.**

**The problem is that while these practitioners are authorized to diagnose ASD, they are not yet recognized to provide eligibility for the Autism or CES waivers. This is due to the language in Act 656 (2021), which was written prior to this licensing update.**

Aligning the 'Qualified Provider' definition with the LPP status would allow these professionals to help families currently facing 12–18 month waitlists. This change would ensure families can access necessary state services while maintaining high diagnostic accuracy

**Arkansas Medicaid will credential and pay LPPs to perform psychological evaluations, but it rejects those same evaluations as "proof" for the Autism Waiver due to outdated language in Act 656.** This contradiction forces families who have already completed a state-funded evaluation to return to a 12-month waitlist for a second evaluation. By adding LPPs to the "Qualified Professional" list, Arkansas can stop paying for duplicate diagnostic testing and immediately move children from waitlists into treatment.

*"With the passage of Act 433, Arkansas has taken a step toward bridging the gap between the state's mental health needs and the availability of a qualified psychology workforce... empowering trained master's-level psychology professionals to deliver science-based care with autonomy and impact."*

*-Dr. Ana Bridges, Clinical Psychologist, Distinguished Professor at the University of Arkansas*

## **The Cost of a Professional Shortage**

The Autism Waiver is specifically targeted at children between the ages of 18 months and eight years, but the policy mandates that a beneficiary must enroll in the program on or before their fifth birthday to receive the maximum three consecutive years of intensive treatment. Because the current "Qualified Professionals" are in short supply, with nearly 40% of Arkansas counties lacking a registered psychologist, families often wait 12 to 18 months just to secure the required diagnostic appointments.

This misses the developmental window of intervention and can result in a severe lifelong developmental deficit for the child and a lifelong financial liability for the state. **If they hit their 5th birthday while still on the waitlist, they are permanently ineligible for this specific intensive program.**

\*The University of Iowa demonstrated that while early intensive intervention requires an upfront investment, it yields an average lifetime savings of \$1.6 million per individual by reducing the need for long-term support and special education.

## **Adolescents and Adults**

The exemption of LPP from "Qualified Professional" does not only exclude children from services. At any age this specific criteria applies and also prevents adults and adolescents from receiving services under **DHS Medicaid Manual (Section 212.200) in relation to the Community and Employment Support (CES) Waiver:**

**"A beneficiary must have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis as defined in Ark. Code Ann. § 20-77-124."**

The "Qualified Professional" requirement creates a barrier across the lifespan, not just during the crucial pediatric years. This is a significant concern for individuals of all ages, as any delay in treatment can lead to functional long-term effects. The CES waiver provides:

- Help finding and keeping a job.
- Supportive Living: Help with daily tasks like bathing, dressing, and cooking.
- Respite Care: Temporary relief for primary caregivers.
- Adaptive Equipment: Funding for specialized tools or home modifications (e.g., wheelchair ramps).
- Community Integration: Services to help the individual participate in local social and recreational activities.

## Quality and Scope

**Evidence shows no difference between doctoral-level psychologists and master's-level regarding ethical complaints or disciplinary actions, and no decline in quality of care.**

These providers diagnose, treat, and manage mental, emotional, and developmental disorders. This service falls within the LPP scope of practice and aligns with the definition of a "Qualified Professional" in Act 656 (2021).

Research demonstrates that when two different trained professionals evaluate the same child using the ADOS - 2, they reach the same diagnostic conclusion at an exceptionally high rate. **By utilizing LPP's who are already certified in this standardized method, along with all important parts of a full evaluation, Arkansas can ensure that waitlist reduction does not come at the expense of diagnostic accuracy or clinical integrity.**

## How the LPP Compares

In the current Arkansas legislature, a qualifying diagnosis for the waiver requires the agreement of specific types of clinicians, and adding a fourth, LPP, would reduce wait-lists, but still keep the high certainty standard of diagnosis.

<b>Profession</b>	<b>Educational Level</b>	<b>ASD-Specific Testing</b>	<b>Diagnosis accepted by Schools, Insurance, &amp; DSM-5-TR</b>	<b>Included in Act 656</b>
Psychologist	Doctorate (Ph.D./Psy.D.)	Full (e.g., ADOS-2, Vineland-3, and IQ tests)	YES	YES
Speech-Language Pathologist	Master's (M.A./M.S.)	Full (Specific to their licensure)	YES	YES
LPP	Master's / Specialist	Full (Matches Psychologist)	YES	<b>NO</b>

## **Further comparison between a “Qualified Provider” and an LPP**

The Licensed Psychological Practitioner fulfills the criteria of a "Qualified Professional" defined in Act 656 of 2021. **Under Act 656, a qualified professional must be educated and licensed in fields related to physical health, mental health, and child and adolescent physical and psychological development. The LPP meets these standards through graduate training and state licensure focused on human development and psychological health.** Because the LPP is credentialed to perform the diagnostic and therapeutic interventions required for this targeted developmental disorder, they serve as a mental health authority capable of satisfying the current requirements.

## **Awareness and Reducing Missed Early Intervention**

*During an In-Person Listening Session, the Arkansas Autism Waiver program was mentioned. The parent of an eleven-year-old with ASD, asked “What is the Autism Waiver”?*

*-Source: Arkansas Governor’s Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2027-2031 State Plan published January 15, 2026*

That parent’s child missed potential years of service and adding LPP would improve outreach. The importance of increasing the speed is also due to the process before a parent can actually receive services:

After being on a waitlist for 12-18 months.....

- The parent submits the application to the DDS Intake and Referral Unit.
- DDS clinicians review the files for functional eligibility.
- The Division of County Operations verifies Medicaid financial eligibility.
- DDS issues an approval letter or places the child on the waitlist.
- The state assigns the child to a specific PASSE organization.
- A Care Coordinator helps the family create a service plan.
- The family searches for an in-network ABA provider with an open slot.

*-In speaking with DDS about helping people work their way through the process it was described “as a spiderweb for the citizens”.*

## **Summary and Solution**

**The Diagnostic Bottleneck:** Arkansas law Act 656 (2021) excludes LPP's, contributing to residents having a 12–18 month wait for a small pool of "Qualified Providers", a delay that causes many children to age out of intensive early intervention entirely, and adolescents and adults to not get the care they need. This can leave a family struggling with the unknown, instead of on a path to treatment.

**The Cost:** Not providing early intervention could cost the state 1.6 million per individual. The state can also be paying for double evaluations. Arkansas Medicaid will credential and pay LPPs to perform psychological evaluations, but it rejects those same evaluations as "proof" for the Autism Waiver or CES due to outdated language in Act 656 (2021).

**Lifespan Barrier:** This isn't just a pediatric issue; CES Waiver for adults uses the same restrictive diagnostic criteria that can block adolescents and adults from accessing job coaching, supportive living, and essential adaptive equipment.

**Legislative Solution:** While Act 433 (2025) authorizes LPP's to provide developmental testing and diagnosis, Act 656 (2021) remains unaligned, creating a barrier to entry for the Autism and CES waiver. Amending Act 656 (2021) to include LPP, formerly LPE-I, as "Qualified Providers" would help ensure that evaluations for diagnosis and possible eligibility are not restricted to a year long or more waitlist. **By aligning these statutes, Arkansas could increase the availability of psychological testing required for CES and Autism programs of care by 44%, utilizing 267 psychological professionals to ensure families can access support without a 12–18 month testing delay, with no decline in quality of care.**