

Glossary of Developmental Disability Terms

With a Focus on California

This glossary explains common terms used in the intellectual and developmental disability (I/DD) field. It is written for individuals, families, and service coordinators. Terms with special meaning in California are noted.

Laws and Rights

ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)

A federal law passed in 1990. It bans discrimination against people with disabilities in jobs, public places, and services.

Conservatorship

A court process that gives one person legal authority to make decisions for another adult. California limits conservatorship for people with developmental disabilities under the Lanterman Act.

Due Process

The legal right to a fair process before the state can deny, change, or stop a person's services.

Fair Hearing

A formal process to appeal a regional center decision. A person can ask for a fair hearing if services are denied, reduced, or stopped.

HCBS (Home and Community-Based Services)

A Medicaid program. It funds services that help people live in their own homes and communities instead of institutions.

IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)

A federal law that guarantees children with disabilities a free, appropriate public education.

Lanterman Act

California's law that gives people with developmental disabilities the right to services and supports. Passed in 1969. Named after Assemblyman Frank Lanterman.

Olmstead Decision

A 1999 U.S. Supreme Court ruling. It says people with disabilities have a right to live in the community, not just in institutions.

Self-Determination

The right of a person to direct their own life, services, and supports.

Supported Decision-Making

A way for a person to get help making their own decisions. It is an alternative to conservatorship.

California System Structure

DDS (Department of Developmental Services)

The California state agency that oversees services for people with developmental disabilities.

Disability Rights California

A nonprofit legal advocacy organization. It protects the rights of people with disabilities in California.

Early Start

California's program for infants and toddlers, birth to age 3, who have a developmental delay or disability.

Eligibility

The requirements a person must meet to qualify for regional center services. Under the Lanterman Act, this generally means a developmental disability that began before age 18.

Intake

The process of applying for regional center services. It includes an evaluation to check eligibility.

Master Plan for Developmental Services

A statewide plan released by California in March 2025. It sets a long-term vision for improving the I/DD service system.

POS (Purchase of Services)

Money that regional centers use to pay for services and supports for individuals. POS data is reported and reviewed for spending patterns.

Regional Center

A nonprofit agency under contract with DDS. It coordinates services for people with developmental disabilities in a specific area of California. There are 21 regional centers statewide.

Service Coordinator (also called Case Manager)

A regional center staff member who helps a person plan, access, and coordinate services.

State Council on Developmental Disabilities (SCDD)

A state body that advocates for people with developmental disabilities. It is independent of DDS. Also includes twelve regional offices.

Vendor

A person or agency approved by a regional center to provide a paid service, such as supported living or day programs.

Planning and Assessment

ABAS (Adaptive Behavior Assessment System)

A standardized tool that measures adaptive skills needed for daily life.

CDER (Client Development Evaluation Report)

An assessment tool used by California regional centers. It records a person's abilities and support needs.

Functional Assessment

An evaluation of what a person can do and what support they need in daily life.

HRST (Health Risk Screening Tool)

A screening tool used to identify a person's health risks and support needs.

ICAP (Inventory for Client and Agency Planning)

An assessment tool that measures adaptive and problem behavior to help plan services.

IEP (Individualized Education Program)

A school-based plan for a child with a disability. It is separate from the IPP but often coordinated with it.

IFSP (Individualized Family Service Plan)

The plan used in Early Start for infants and toddlers. It focuses on the family as well as the child.

interRAI-ID

An assessment tool designed for people with intellectual disabilities. It covers health, behavior, and support needs.

IPP (Individual Program Plan)

The written plan developed with a person and their regional center team. It lists goals, services, and supports.

Person-Centered Planning

A planning approach built around a person's own preferences, strengths, culture, and goals.

Person-Centered Thinking

A set of skills and tools used to put person-centered values into everyday practice.

Self-Advocacy

Speaking up for oneself and one's own rights, needs, and choices.

SIS-A (Supports Intensity Scale, Adult Version)

A standardized assessment tool. It measures the type and intensity of support a person needs.

Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales

A standardized tool that measures a person's everyday living, social, and communication skills.

Services and Supports

Adult Residential Facility

A licensed home that provides 24-hour non-medical care for adults.

Circle of Support

A group of people, often unpaid, who support a person's relationships, decisions, and community life.

Community Integration

The practice of supporting a person to take part in everyday community life alongside others.

Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)

A job in the community, paid at least minimum wage, working alongside people without disabilities.

Day Program

A community-based program offering activities, skill-building, or work-related support during the day.

Family Support Services

Services that help families caring for a member with a developmental disability at home.

ICF/DD (Intermediate Care Facility for the Developmentally Disabled)

A licensed facility that provides 24-hour care for people with developmental disabilities.

Independent Living Services (ILS)

Services that teach skills for living independently, such as budgeting, cooking, or transportation.

Individual Budget

Under the Self-Determination Program, the amount of money set aside for a person's services and supports.

Microboard

A small nonprofit board formed by family and friends to support one person's life and services.

Respite Care

Short-term relief care for a family caregiver, so they can rest or attend to other needs.

Self-Determination Program (SDP)

A California program that gives a person more choice and control over their services and budget.

Sheltered Workshop

A segregated work setting for people with disabilities, often paying below minimum wage. California has moved away from this model.

Supported Employment

Paid job support that helps a person find and keep competitive employment in the community.

Supported Living Services (SLS)

Services that help a person live in their own home in the community, with individualized support.

Funding and Oversight**ABLE Account**

A tax-advantaged savings account for people with disabilities. Saving in this account does not affect most public benefits.

ANSA / CANS

Standardized tools used to assess strengths and needs, mostly in children's mental health and social services systems.

Medi-Cal

California's Medicaid program. It funds health coverage and many developmental disability services.

Medicaid Waiver

A federal approval that lets states use Medicaid funds for home and community-based services instead of institutional care.

National Core Indicators (NCI)

A national survey system that tracks outcomes and quality of life for people receiving developmental disability services.

Quality Assurance

The ongoing process of checking whether services meet required standards and produce good outcomes.

Special Needs Trust

A legal trust that holds money for a person with a disability without affecting their public benefits.

SSDI (Social Security Disability Insurance)

A federal benefit for people with disabilities who have a sufficient work history.

SSI (Supplemental Security Income)

A federal cash benefit for people with disabilities and limited income.