

Senate Judiciary Committee Confirmation Hearing
Remarks by Jennifer Velez
Commissioner
New Jersey Department of Human Services
March 8, 2010

Good afternoon, Chairman Scutari and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I'd like to also thank Governor Christie for asking me to continue to serve as Commissioner of the Department of Human Services. I was humbled by his request.

I appeared before this Committee nearly three years ago and I am grateful for the confidence that the committee expressed in approving my nomination at that time. It has indeed been an honor to serve as Commissioner of this Department. I continue to believe in our core mission, in the value and necessity of the work that we do, and in the team of individuals who are committed to its continued success.

The Department, as many of you know, serves 1 out of 8 people in our state, including those who live with mental illness, struggle with substance abuse, have a physical or developmental disability, are blind or visually impaired, deaf or hard of hearing, or are economically insecure and rely upon the State for health insurance, food stamps, cash assistance, and child care – or depend upon the state for reliable child support.

At present, we operate seven developmental centers and five psychiatric hospitals in New Jersey for people having some of the most complex needs imaginable. We have made strides in deinstitutionalization, in accordance with the U.S. Supreme Court's *Olmstead* decision – but we have much more work to do.

We continue to have a staggering waiting list for families awaiting in-home or residential services for their loved ones with developmental disabilities. While we have made modest strides and work every day to do more, we have a very long way to go to ensure that reducing the waiting list to a manageable and predictable level continues to be a top priority for our state.

The everyday struggles of individuals served by this Department are unfortunately exacerbated when the economy sours. The need for additional social and economic supports increases, and the State's financial ability to respond worsens. Our fragile safety net is stretched even more thinly – and now, with the worst economy since the Great Depression, we have begun to see holes. These challenging times likewise place enormous financial stress on our provider agencies whose work and mission support those served by the Department. I am grateful for their partnership; we've had our challenges – and we'll continue to be challenged by the enormity of our fiscal crisis, but we'll proceed with open and honest dialogue to achieve viable and available solutions.

Without question, this job is hard. It affects real people and real lives. It certainly remains the most challenging and gratifying work that I can imagine in the field of social services – and I'm committed to this Department's success. I also remain unwavering in my commitment to ensure that those whose lives are impacted by this department are served with integrity, dignity and respect – certainly to the best of my ability – and that their needs continue to resonate with all of us.

Thank you.